THE PLANT

BY

STEPHEN KING



PART I

January 4, 1981

Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Gentlemen:

I have written a book that you might want to publish. It is very good. It is all scary and all *true.* It is called *TrueTales of Demon Infestations.* I know all the things in it from first hand. Contents include stories from "The World of Voodoo," "The World of the Aether," and "TheWorld of the Living Dead." I include recipes for some potions as well, but these could be "censored" if you felt they were too dangerous although for most people they won't work at all and in a chapter called "The World of Spells" I explain why.

I am offering this book for publication *now.* I am willing to sell *all rights* (except for movie rights; I will direct the film myself). There are photos if you want them. If you are interested in this book (no other publisher has seen it, I am sending it to you because you are the publishers of *Bloody Houses,* which was quite good), please answer with the "SASE" I have enclosed. I will send the manuscript with return postage in case you don't like it (or don't understand it). Please respond as soon as possible. I think "multiple submissions" are unethical, but I want to sell *True Tales of Demon Infestations as* soon as possible. In this book there is some "scary s**t!" If you know what I mean.

Yours sincerely,

Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

to: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Submissions / January 11-15th, 1981

A new year, and the slush in the slush pile grows ever deeper. I don't know how the rest of your toiling editorial minions are doing, but I continue to roll the existential rock of America's unpublished aspiring—at least my share of it. All of which is only to say that I read my share of crud this week (and no, I haven't been smoking what W. C. Fields called "the illicit sponduix," either—I'm just having a prolix day).

With your concurrence, I'm returning 15 book-length manuscripts which arrived unsolicited (see Returns, next page), 7 "outlines and sample chapters" and 4 unidentifiable blobs that look a bit like typescripts. One of them is a book of something called "gay event poetry" called Suck My Big Black Cock, and another, called L'il Lolita, is about a man in love with a first grader. I think. It's written in pencil and it's hard to tell for sure.

Also with your concurrence, I'm asking to see outline and sample chapters on 5 books, including the new bodice-ripper from that bad-tempered librarian in Minnesota (the authors never snoop in your files, do they, boss? Ordinarily it would be a flat submission, but the poor performance of His Flaming Kisses cannot be justified even by our horrible distribution set-up— any word on what's happening with

United News Dealers, by the way?). Synopsis for your files (below).

Last, and probably least, I'm appending an odd little query letter from one Carlos Detweiller of Central Falls, Rhode Island. If I were back at Brown University, happily majoring in English, planning to write great novels, and laboring under the misapprehension that everyone who publishes must be brilliant or at least "real smart," I'd throw Mr. Detweiller's letter out at once. (Carlos Detweiller? I ask myself even now, as I rattle the keys of this ancient Royal—can that be a real name? Surely not!) Probably I'd use tongs to handle it, just in case the man's obvious dyslexia was catching.

But two years at Zenith House have changed me, Roger. The scales have fallen from my eyes. You don't really get heavyweights like Milton, Shakespeare, Lawrence, and Faulkner in perspective until you've lunched at Burger Heaven with the author of Rats from Hell or helped the creator of Gash Me, My Darling through her current writer's block. You come to realize that the great edifice of literature has one fuck of a lot more subbasements than you expected when you sneaked your first stroke-book up to your bedroom under your shirt (no I have not been smoking dope!).

So okay. This guy writes like a moderately bright third-grader (all declarative sentences—his letter has the panache of a heavyset guy walking downstairs in construction boots), but so does Olive Barker, and considering our creaky distribution system, her Windhover series has done quite well. The sentence in the first paragraph which says he knows all of these things "from first hand" suggests he's a ding-dong. You know that. His assertion that he's going to direct the movie suggests that he's a ding-dong with delusions of grandeur. I think we both know that. Further, I'd stake my last pair of skivvies (I'm wearing them, and mighty gray they are!) that, despite his disclaimer, every publisher in New York has seen True Tales of Demon Infestations.

Loyalty to one's company can go only so far, chum; not even a moderately bright third-grader would start at Zenith House. I'd guess this letter has been patiently retyped and sent out by the indefatigable (and probably obsessed) Mr. Detweiller at least forty times, starting with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, or maybe even Alfred A. Knopf.

But I think there's a possibility—albeit an extremely thin one—that Mr. Detweiller may have researched enough material to actually make a book. It would have to be rewritten, of course—his query letter makes that abundantly clear—and the title sucks, but we have several writers on our books who would be more than happy to do a little ghost-writing and pick up a quick $600. (I saw you wince—make that $400. Probably the indefatigable Olive Barker is the best of them. Also, I think Olive has a thing for Valium. Junkies work harder than normal people, boss, as I think you know. At least until they die, and Olive's tough. She doesn't look too good since her stroke—I hate the way the left side of her face just hangs there—but she is tough.)

As I say, the chances are thin, and it's always a trifle risky to encourage an obvious crazy, because it is so difficult to get rid of them (remember General Hecksler and his book Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers? For a while I thought the man might be genuinely dangerous, and of course he was a large part of the reason poor old Bill Hammer quit). But actually, Bloody Houses did do pretty well, and the whole thing—blurry photos and all— came out of the New York Public Library. So you tell me: do we add ole Carlos to Returns or do we invite him to submit an outline and sample of chapters? Speak quickly, O great leader, for the fate of the universe hangs in the balance.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton

DATE: 1/15/81

MESSAGE: Dear Christ, Johnny! Do you *ever* shut up? That memo was *three pages long!* If you *weren't* stoned, you have no excuse. Reject the damn query letter, tell this Carlos What's-His-Face to send his manuscript, buy him a pony, whatever you want. But save me the mother-fucking thesis. I don't get them from Herb, Sandra, or Bill, and I don't want them from you. "Shovel the shit and shut up," how does that strike you as a motto?

Roger

P.S. Harlow Enders called again today—we're going to keep on drawing paychecks for another year at least, it seems. After that, who knows? He says there's going to be an "assessment of position" in June, and "a total review of Zenith's overall position in the market" next January—I construe those two fulsome phrases to mean we could be for sale next January unless our market position improves, and given our current distribution system, I don't see how it can. My head aches. I think I may have a brain tumor. Please don't send me any more long memos.

r.

P.P.S. L*'il Lolita* is actually a pretty good title, don't you think? We could commission it. I'm thinking maybe Mort Yeager, he's got a touch for that sort of thing. Remember T*eenage Lingerie Show*? The girl in L*'il Lolita* could be eleven, I think—wasn't the original Lolita twelve?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Possible brain tumor

Sounds more like a tension headache to me. Take four Quaaludes and call me in the morning. By the way, Mort Yeager's in jail. Receiving stolen property, I think.
John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

T O : John Kenton DATE: 1/16/81

MESSAGE: Don't you have any work to do?

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John r e: Merciless huckstering by insensitive superior

Yes, I'll write a letter to Carlos Detweiller, next year's National Book Award winner.
John

p.s.—Don't bother to thank me.

January 16, 1981

Mr. Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th Street, Apt. E
Central Falls, Rhode Island 40222

Dear Mr. Detweiller,

Thank you for your interesting letter of January 4th, with its brief but intriguing description of your book, True Tales of Demon Infestations. I would welcome a fuller synopsis of the book, and invite you to submit sample chapters (I would prefer chapters 1–3) with your synopsis. Both the synopsis and the sample chapters should be typed and double-spaced, on good quality white bond paper (not the erasable type; on erasable bond, whole chapters have a way of simply disappearing in the mail).

As you may know, Zenith is a small paperback house, and our lists currently match our size. Because we publish only originals, we look at a great many proposals; because we are small, the proposals we look at are, in most cases, returned because they do not seem to fit our current needs. All of which is my way of cautioning you not to construe this letter as a covenant to publish your book, because that is most definitely not the case. I would suggest you mail off the synopsis and sample chapters with the idea that we will ultimately reject your book. Then you will be prepared for the worst...or pleasantly surprised if we should find it is right for Zenith Books.

Finally, here are the standard caveats upon which our legal department (and the legal departments, so far as I know, of all publishing houses) insist: you must enclose

adequate postage to ensure the return of your manuscript (but please do not send cash to cover postage), you should realize that Zenith House accepts no responsibility for the safe return of your manuscript, although we'll take all reasonable care, and that, as I said above, our agreement to look is in no way a covenant to publish.
I look forward to hearing from you, and hope this finds you well.

to: Roger
f r o m: John r e: upon further study...

Sincerely yours,

John Kenton
Associate Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South New York, New York 10017

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

...I agree. I do write too much. Appended to this is a copy of my letter to Detweiller. Looks like a synopsis of The Naked and the Dead, doesn't it?

John

January 21, 1981

Mr. John Kenton, Editor
Zenith House, Publishers
490 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Kenton,

Thank you for your letter of January 16th, in which I am of receipt of. I am sending off the entire manuscript of *True Tales of Demon Infestations* tomorrow. My money is low today, but my boss, Mrs. Barfield, owes me about five dollars from playing the lottery. Boy, she's a real sucker for those little cards you scratch off!

I would send you a "sinopsis proposal," as you say, but there is no sense of doing that when you can read it for yourself. As Mr. Keen in my building says, "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest." Mr. Keen does not really have any deep wisdom but he says something witty like that from time to time. I tried on one occasion to instruct him (Mr. Keen) in the "deeper mysteries" and he only said, "Each to his own, Carlos." I think you will probably agree that this is a silly comment which only *sounds* witty.

Because we don't have to worry about the "sinopsis proposal," I will spend my letter telling you something about me. I am twenty-three (although everyone says I look older). I work at the Central Falls House of Flowers for Mrs. Tina Barfield, who knew my mother when my mother was still alive. I was born on March 24th, which makes me an Aries. Aries people, as you know, are very psychic, but *wild.* Luckily for me, I am on the "cusp" of Pisces, which gives me the control I need to deal with the psychic universe. I have tried to explain all this to Mr. Keen, but he only says, "There's something *fishy* about you, Carlos," he is always joking like that and sometimes he can be very irritating.

But enough about me.

I have worked on T*rue Tales of Demon Infestations fo*r seven years (since age 16). Much of the information in it I

got from the "OUIJA" board. I used to do the "OUIJA" with my mother, Mrs. Barfield, Don Barfield (he is now dead), and sometimes a friend of mine named Herb Hagstrom (also now dead, poor lad). Once in awhile others would join our little "circle" as well. Back in our Pawtucket days, my mother and I were quite "social!"

Some of the things we found out from "OUIJA" that are described in "blood-curdling detail" in T*rue Tales of Demon Infestations:* 1. The disappearance of Amelia Earhart was actually the work of *demons*! 2. Demonic forces at work on H.M.S. *Titanic.*
3. The "tulpa" that infested Richard Nixon. 4. There will be a President from ARKANSAS! 5. More.

Of course this is not "all." "Don't cool me off, I'm just gettin' warmed up," as Mr. Keen s ays. In many ways *True Tales of Demon Infestations i*s like *The Necronomicon,* except that book was fictional (made up by H. P. Lovecraft, who also came from Rhode Island) and mine is *true.* I have amazing stories of black magic "covens" I have attended, by taking a potion and flying to these covens through the aether (I have recently been to covens in Omaha, Neb., Flagstaff, Ariz., and Fall River, Mass., without ever leaving "the comfort of my own home"). You are probably asking yourself, "Carlos, does this mean you are a student of the 'black Arts'?" Yes, but don't worry! After all, you are my "connection" to getting my book published, right?

As I told you in my last letter, there is also a chapter, "TheWorld of Spells," which most people will find very interesting. Working in a greenhouse and flower-shop has been especially good for working spells, as most require *fresh* herbs and plants. I am very good with plants, Mrs. Barfield would even te ll you that, and I am now growing some very "strange" ones in the back of the greenhouse. It is probably too late to put them in this book, but as Mr. Keen sometimes tells me, "Carlos, the time to think about

tomorrow is yesterday." Maybe we could do a follow-up, *Strange Plants.* Let me have your thinking on this.

I will close now. Let me know when you get the manuscript (a postcard will do), and fill me in as soon as possible on royalty rates, etc. I can come to N.Y.C. any Wednesday on the train or Greyhound Bus if you want to have a "publishing luncheon" or come here and I will introduce you to Mrs. Barfield and Mr. Keen. I also have more photographs than the on es I am sending. I am happy to have you publish *True Tales of Demon Infestations.*

Your new author,

Carlos Detweiller
147 E. 14th St., Apt. E
Central Falls, R.I. 40222

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: True Tales of Demon Infestations, by Carlos Detweiller

I just received a letter from Detweiller in regard to his book. I think that, in inviting him to submit, I made the biggest mistake of my editorial career. Oooh, my skin is starting to hurt...

from the office of the editor-in-chief

T O: John Kenton DATE: 1/23/81

You made your bed. Now lie in it. After all, we can always get it ghost-written, right? Hee-hee.

Roger

January 25, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I feel almost as if I am in the middle of a goddam archetype—segments of the Sunday New York Times on the floor, an old Simon and Garfunkel album on the stereo, a Bloody Mary near at hand. Rain tapping on the glass, making it all the more cozy. Am I trying to make you homesick? Well... maybe a little. After all, the only thing the scene lacks is you, and you're probably paddling out beyond the line of breakers on a surfboard as I write these words (and wearing a bikini more non than existent).

Actually, I know you're working hard (probably not too hard) and I have every confidence that the PhD will be a world-beater. It's just that last week was a real horror show for me and I'm afraid there may be worse to come. Among other things, Roger accused me of prolixity (well, actually that was the week before, but you know what I mean), and I think I feel a real prolixity attack coming on. Try to bear with me, okay?

Basically, the problem is Carlos Detweiller (with a name like that he couldn't be anything but a problem, right?) He's going to be a short-term problem, is old Carlos, like poison ivy or a mouth sore, but as with those two things, knowing the problem is short-term doesn't ease the pain at all—it only keeps you from going insane.

Roger's right—I do tend toward prolixity, That's not the same as logorrhea, though. I'll try to avoid that.

The facts, then. As you know, every week we get thirty or forty "over the transom" submissions. An "over the transom" is anything addressed to "Gentlemen," "Dear Sir," or "To Whom It May Concern"—an unsolicited manuscript, in other words. Well...they're not all manuscripts; at least half of them are what us hip publishing guys call "query letters" (getting tired of all these quotation marks yet? You should read Carlos's last letter—it would put you off them for life).

Anyway, they should all be query letters if this mudball lived up to its advance billing and really was the best of all possible worlds. Like 99% of the other publishers in New York, we no longer read unsolicited manuscripts—at least, that's our official policy. It says so in Writer's Market, Writer's Yearbook, The Freelance, and The Pen Newsletter. But apparently a lot of the aspiring Wolfes and Hemingways out there either don't read those things, don't believe them when they do read them, or simply ignore them—pick what sounds best to you.

In most cases we at least look at the slush, if it's typewritten (please don't breathe a word of this or we'll be inundated with manuscripts and Roger will probably shoot me—he's close now, I think). After all, Ordinary People came in over the transom and was first read by some editorial assistant who just happened to recognize that it was a hell of a story. But that, of course, was a million-to-one shot. I've never seen an unsolicited manuscript that looked like any more than the work of a bright fifth-grader. Of course Zenith House is hardly Alfred A. Knopf (our lead title for February is Scorpions from Hell, by Anthony L. K. LaScorbia, his follow-up to Rats from Hell), but still...you hope...

Detweiller, at least, followed protocol and sent a query letter. Herb Porter, Sandra Jackson, Bill Gelb, and I divvy those that came in the week before each Monday, and I had the misfortune to get this one. After reading it and mulling it over in my mind for all of twenty-five minutes (long enough to write Roger a long-winded memo on the subject that,

under the circumstances, I'm probably never going to live down), I wrote Detweiller a letter asking him to submit a few sample chapters and an outline of the rest. And last Friday I got a letter that...well, short of sending it to you, I'm not sure how to describe it. He seems to be a twenty-three-year-old florist's assistant from Central Falls with a mother fixation and the conviction that he's attended witch's sabbats all over America while high on nutmeg, or something. I keep envisioning covens in Motel Six parking lots.

I thought ole Carlos's True Tales of Demon Infestations (I have gotten to the point where the title alone has the power to make me blanch and shudder in my shoes) might be some kid's adolescent research hobby— something that could be cut down and juiced up and sold to the Amityville Horror audience. His original letter was short, you see, and so full of these punchy little sentences—subject-predicate, subject-predicate, wham-bamthank-you-ma'am—that one could believe that. And while I was never under any illusions that the man was a writer, I made an assumption of marginal literacy that turns out to be totally unfounded. In fact, just looking back at the original Detweiller letter makes me wonder how I ever could have scribbled the word This has a certain half-baked charm in the margin... and yet I see I did.

So what? You're saying. Big deal. Give the schmuck's manuscript a token look when it comes in and then send it back with a form letter— "Zenith House regrets," etc. That's right...but it's wrong, too. It's wrong because guys like Carlos Detweiller turn out all too often to be like a bad case of head-lice—easy to get, the very devil to get rid of. The worst of it is, I mentioned this very fact to Roger in my original overlong memo about the book, recalling General Hecksler and his Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers— you must remember me telling you how the General bombarded us with registered letters and phone calls after we rejected the book (you may not know, however, about the Mailgram Herb Porter got from him—in it Hecksler referred to Herb as "the

designated Jew," a reference none of us has figured out to this day). It got steadily more abusive, and just before his sister had him committed to an asylum up-state, Sandra Jackson confessed to me that she was getting scared to go home alone—said she was afraid the General might jump out of a darkened doorway with a knife in one hand and a bouquet of psychic posies in the other. She said the hell of it was that none of us even knew what he looked like—we'd have needed a writing sample instead of a mug-shot to identify him.

And of course it all sounds funny now, but it wasn't funny when it happened—it was only after his sister wrote to us that we found out we were actually one of his lesser obsessions, and of course he did turn out to be dangerous; just ask the Albany bus driver he stabbed.

I knew all that—even mentioned it to Roger—and still blithely went ahead and invited Detweiller to submit.

Of course, the other thing (and knowing me as you do, you've probably already guessed it) is simpler—it upsets me to have goofed in such grand style. If a gonzo illiterate like Carlos Detweiller could fool me this badly (I did think his book would have to be ghosted, true, but that is still no excuse), how much good stuff am I missing? Please don't laugh; I'm serious. Roger is always ragging me about my "lit'ry aspirations," and I suppose he has a right to (no progress on the novel this week if you're interested—this Detweiller thing has depressed me too much), considering where the erstwhile head of the Brown University Milton Society ended up (he ended up encouraging Anthony LaScorbia to get right to work on his newest epic, Wasps from Hell, for one thing). But I think I would happily accept six months of hectoring letters from the obviously mad Carlos Detweiller, complete with veiled threats becoming a little less veiled with each missive, if I could only be assured that I hadn't let something good slip by because of a totally deadened critical response.

I don't know if this is more or less gloomy, but Roger mentioned in one of his Famous Memos that the Apex Corporation is going to give Zenith at least one more year to stop impersonating a dead dog and start showing some sales pizazz. He got the news from Harlow Enders, Apex's chief New York comptroller, so presumably it's accurate. I guess it's good news when you consider that not everyone in publishing has got an office to go to these days, not even with a company whose biggest steady seller is the Macho Man series and whose biggest in-house problem isn't spies making copies of manuscripts so that the movie studios can get an early look, but cockroaches in the water-cooler. It's maybe not so good when you think of how little money we have to spend (maybe you deserve to get the Carlos Detweillers of the world when the most you can offer as an advance against royalties is $1,800) and how shitty our distribution is. But no one at Apex understands books or book marketing—I doubt if anyone there even knows why they picked up Zenith House last year in the first place, except that it happened to be for sale cheap. The chances that we can improve our position (2% of the paperback market, fifteenth in a field of fifteen) over the next year aren't very high. Maybe we'll end up getting married in California after all, huh, babe?

Well, enough doom and gloom—I'll mail this off and hopefully get back to work on my book tomorrow—and the next letter I write will be of the "chatty, newsy" variety. Shall I ask ole Carlos to send you flowers from Central Falls?

Forget I asked that.

My love,

John

p.s.—And tell your roommate that I don't believe manufacturing "the world's largest edible Frisbee" has any merit whatsoever, Guinness Book of Records or not. Why not ask her if she has any interest in trying for the world's record of sitting in a spaghetti-filled bathtub? First one to shatter it wins an all-expense-paid trip to Central Falls, Rhode Island...

J.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: True Tales of Demon Infestations, by Carlos Detweiller

Detweiller's manuscript came this morning, wrapped in shopping bags, secured with twine (much of it broken), and apparently typed by someone with terrible motor control problems. It is every bit as bad as I feared— abysmal, beyond hope.

That could and should be the end, but some of the photos he enclosed are intensely disturbing, Roger—and this is no joke, so please don't treat it as one. They are a weird conglomeration of black-and-white glossies (made with a Nikon, I would guess), color slides (ditto Nikon), and Polaroid SX-70 shots. Most of them are ridiculous—middle-aged men and women either got up in black bathrobes with cabalistic designs sewn on them or middleaged men and women in nothing at all, displaying skinny shanks, dangling breasts, and pot bellies. They look exactly like what you'd guess the folks of Central Falls would imagine a Black Mass should look like (in some of them there is a much younger man who is probably Detweiller himself—this young man is always shot from the rear or with his face in deep shadow), and the locale appears, in most cases, to be a greenhouse—associated with the florist's where Detweiller told me he works, I imagine.

There's one packet of six photos labelled "The Sakred Seance" which show plasmic manifestations so obviously faked it's pitiful (what appears to be a balloon frosted with Day-Glo paint is floating from the medium's fingertips). A third packet of photos (all SX-70 shots) are textbook-style "exhibit" shots of various plants which purport to be deadly nightshade, belladonna, virgin's hair, etc. (impossible for me to tell if the labels are accurate—I can't tell a maple tree from a ponderosa pine without help; Ruth would probably know).

Okay, the disturbing part. Some of the photos (four, to be completely accurate) in the "Black Mass" scenes purport to show a human sacrifice— and it looks to me as if maybe they really did kill someone. The first photo shows an old man with an extremely realistic expression of terror on his face lying spread-eagled on a table in the greenhouse I mentioned. Several people in hokey robes are holding him down. The young man I presume to be Carlos Detweiller is standing on the left, naked, with what looks like a Bowie knife. The second shows the knife plunging into the old fellow's chest; in the third, the man I presume to be Detweiller is reaching into the chest cavity; in the last he is holding up a dripping thing for the others to look at. The dripping thing looks very much like a human heart.

The pictures could be complete hokum, and I'd be the first to admit it—a half-decent special effects man could cobble up something like this, I suppose, especially in stills...but the efforts to mislead in the other photos are so painfully obvious that I wonder if that can be.

Just glancing at them is enough to make me want to whoops my cookies, Roger—what if we've stumbled onto a bunch of people who are really practicing human sacrifice? Mass murder, perhaps? I'm nauseated, but right now I'm more scared than anything else. I could have told you all of this in person, of course, but it seemed important to get this down in writing, just in case it does turn out to be a legal

matter. Christ, I wish I'd never even heard of Carlos Fucking Detweiller.

Come down and take a look at these as soon as you possibly can, okay? I just don't know if I should pick up the phone and call the police in Central Falls or not.

John

PART II

January 30, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Yes, it was good to talk to you last night, too. Even when you're on the other side of the country, I don't know what I'd do without you. I think this has been just about the worst month of my life, and without you to talk to and your warm support, I don't know how I could have gotten through it. The initial terror and revulsion of those pictures was bad, but I've discovered I can deal with terror—and Roger may be locked in his impersonation of some crusty editor in a Damon Runyon story (or maybe it's that Ben Hecht play I'm thinking of), but the funny thing is, he really does have a heart of gold. When all that shit came down, he was like a rock—his support never wavered.

Terror is bad, but the feeling that you've been a horse's ass is a lot worse, I've found. When you're afraid, you can fall back on your bravery. When you're humiliated, I guess you just have to call up your fiancée long distance and bawl on her shoulder. All I'm saying, I guess, is thanks—thanks for being there and thanks for not laughing...or calling me a hysterical old woman jumping at shadows.

I had one final phone-call last night after I'd talked to you—from Chief Barton Iverson of the Central Falls P.D. He was also remarkably forgiving, but before I give you the final gist of it, let me try to clarify the whole sequence of events following my reception of the Detweiller manuscript last Wednesday. Your confusion was justifiable—I think I can be a little clearer now that I've had a night's sleep (and without

Ma Bell in my ear, chipping off the dollars from my malnourished paycheck!).

As I think I told you, Roger's reaction to the "Sacrifice Photos" was even stronger and more immediate than mine. He came down to my office as if he had rockets in his heels, leaving two distributors waiting in his outer office (and, as I believe Flannery O'Connor once pointed out, a good distributor is hard to find), and when I showed him the pictures, he turned pale, put his hand over his mouth, and made some extremely unlovely gagging sounds so I guess you'd have to say I was more right than wrong about the quality of the photos (considering the subject matter, "quality" is a strange word to use, but it's the only one that seems to fit).

He took a minute or two to think, then told me I'd better call the police in Central Falls—but not to say anything to anybody else.

"They could still be fakes," he said, "but it's best not to take any chances. Put 'em in an envelope and don't touch them anymore. There could be fingerprints."

"They don't look like fakes," I said. "Do they?"

"No."

He went back to the distributors and I called the cops in Central Falls—my first conversation with Iverson. He listened to the whole story and then took my telephone number. He said he'd call me back in five minutes, but he didn't tell me why.

He was actually back in about three minutes. He told me to take the photographs to the 31st Precinct at 140 Park Avenue South, and that the New York Police would wire the "Sacrifice Photos" to Central Falls.

"We should have them by three this afternoon," he said. "Maybe even sooner."

I asked him what he intended to do until then.

"Not much," he said. "I'm going to send a plainsclothesman around to this House of Flowers and try to

ascertain whether or not Detweiller is still working there. I hope to do that without arousing any suspicions. Until I see the pictures, Mr. Kenton, that's really all I can do."

I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling him that I thought there was a lot more he could do. I didn't want to be dismissed as a typical pushy New Yorker, and I didn't want to have this fellow exasperated with me from the jump. And I reminded myself that Iverson hadn't seen the pictures. Under the circumstances I guess he was going as fast as he could on the basis of a call from a stranger—a stranger who might be a crank.

I got him to promise he'd call me back as soon as he got the photographs, and then I took them down to the 31st Precinct myself. They were expecting me; a Sergeant Tyndale met me in the reception area and took the envelope of photographs. He also made me promise I'd stay at the office until I'd heard from them.

"The Central Falls Chief of Police—"

"Not him," Tyndale said, as if I was talking about a trained monkey. "Us."

All the movies and novels are right, babe—it doesn't take long before you start feeling like a criminal yourself. You expect somebody to turn a bright light in your face, hook one leg over a beat-up old desk, lean down, blow cigarette smoke in your face, and say "Okay, Carmody, where did you put the bodies?" I can laugh about it now, but I sure wasn't laughing then.

I wanted Tyndale to take a look at the photos and tell me what he thought of them—whether or not they were authentic—but he just shooed me out with another reminder to "stick close," as he put it. It had started to rain and I couldn't get a cab and by the time I'd walked the seven blocks back to Zenith House I was soaked. I had also eaten half a roll of Tums.

Roger was in my office. I asked him if the distributors were gone, and he flapped a hand in their direction. "Sent

one back to Queens and one back to Brooklyn," he said. "Inspired. They'll sell another fifty copies of Ants from Hell between them. Schmucks." He lit a cigarette. "What did the cops say?"

I told him what Tyndale had told me.

"Ominous," he said. "Very fooking ominous."

"They looked real to you, didn't they?"

He considered, then nodded. "Real as rain."

"Good."

"What do you mean, good? There's nothing good about any of this."

"I only meant—"

"Yeah, I know what you meant." He got up, shook the legs of his pants the way he always does, and told me to call if I heard from anybody. "And don't say anything to anyone else."

"Herb's looked in here a couple of times," I said. "I think he thinks you're going to fire me."

"The idea has some merit. If he asks you right out—"

"Lie."

"Right."

"Always a pleasure to lie to Herb Porter."

He stopped again at the door, started to say something, and then Riddley, the mailroom kid, came by pushing a basket of rejected manuscripts.

"You been in there most de mawnin, Mist' Adler," he said. "Is you gwine t'fire Mist' Kenton?"

"Get out of here, Riddley," Roger said, "and if you don't stop insulting your entire race with that disgusting Rastus accent I'll fire you."

"Yassuh, Mist' Adler!" Riddley said, and got his mail basket rolling again. "I'se goan! I'se goan!"

Roger looked at me and rolled his eyes despairingly. "As soon as you hear," he repeated, and went out.

I heard from Chief Iverson early that afternoon. Their man had ascertained that Detweiller was at the House of Flowers,

business as usual. He said that the House of Flowers is a neat long frame building on a street that's "going downhill" (Iverson's phrase). His man went in, got two red roses, and walked out again. Mrs. Tina Barfield, the proprietor of record according to the papers on file at City Hall, waited on him. The fellow who actually got the flowers, cut them, and wrapped them, was wearing a name tag with the word CARLOS on it. Iverson's man described him as about twenty-five, dark, not bad looking, but portly. The man said he seemed very intense; didn't smile much.

There's an exceptionally long greenhouse behind the shop. Iverson's man commented on it and Mrs. Barfield told him it was as deep as the block; she said they called it "the little jungle."

I asked Iverson if he'd gotten the wirephotos yet. He said he hadn't, but wanted to confirm for me that Detweiller was there. Just knowing he was brought me some relief—I don't mind telling you that, Ruth.

So here's Act III, Scene I, and the plot sickens, as us guys in the prosebiz like to say. I got a call from Sergeant Tyndale, at the 31st Precinct. He told me that Central Falls had gotten the pictures, that Iverson had taken one look, and had ordered Carlos Detweiller brought in for questioning. Tyndale wanted me down at the 31st right away to make a statement. I was to bring the Demon Infestations manuscript with me, and all my Detweiller correspondence. I told him I would be happy to come down to the 31st as soon as I talked to Iverson again; in fact, I'd be willing to catch The Pilgrim at Penn Station and train right up there to—

"Please don't call anyone," Tyndale said, "and don't go anywhere— anywhere, Mr. Kenton—until you've beat your feet down here and make a statement."

I'd spent the day feeling upset and on edge. My nervous condition was getting worse rather than better, and I suppose I snapped at the guy. "You sound as though I'm the one under suspicion."

"No," he said. "No, Mr. Kenton." A pause. "Not as of now." Another pause. "But he did send you the pictures, didn't he?"

For a moment I was so flabbergasted I could only flap my mouth like a fish. Then I said, "But I explained that."

"Yes, you did. Now come down here and explain it for the record, please." Tyndale hung up, leaving me feeling both angry and sort of existential—but I'd be lying, Ruth, if I didn't tell you that mostly what I felt was scared—I'd gotten in far over my head, and it hadn't taken long at all.

I popped into Roger's office, told him what was going on as quickly and sanely as I could, and then headed for the elevator. Riddley came out of the mailroom wheeling his Dandux cart—empty, this time.

"Is you in trouble wid de law, Mist Kenton?" he whispered hoarsely as I went past him—I tell you, Ruth, it did nothing at all to improve my peace of mind.

"No!" I said, so loudly that two people going up the hall looked around at me.

"Cause if you is, my cousin Eddie is sho one fine lawyer. Yassuh!"

"Riddley," I said, "where did you go to college?"

"Co'nell, Mist Kenton, and it sho was fine!" Riddley grinned, show i n g teeth as white as piano keys (and just as numerous, one is tempted to believe).

"If you went to Cornell," I said, "why in God's name do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat, Mist Kenton?"

"Never mind," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's always fine to have one of these philosophical discussions with you, Riddley, but I've got an appointment and I ought to run."

"Yassuh!" He said, flashing that obscene grin again. "And if you want my cousin Eddie's phone numbah—"

But by then I had escaped into the hall. It's always a relief to get free of Riddley. I suppose it's terrible to say this, but I wish Roger would fire him— I look at that big piano-key grin

and, God help me, I wonder if Riddley hasn't made a pact to drink white man's blood when the fire comes next time. Along with his cousin, Eddie, of course.

Well, forget all that—I've been tickling the typewriter keys for over an hour and a half, and this is starting to look like a novelette. I had better scamp through the rest. So...Act III, Scene II.

I arrived at the police station late and soaking wet all over again—no cabs and the rain had become a good steady downpour. Only a January rain in New York City can be that cold (California looks better to me every day, Ruth!).

Tyndale took a look at me, offered a thin smile with no noticeable humor in it, and said: "Central Falls just released your author. No cabs out there, huh? Never are when it rains."

"They let Detweiller go?" I asked incredulously. "And he's not our author. I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot-plague-pole."

"Well, whatever he is, the whole thing's nothing but a tempest in a teapot," he said, handing me what may have been the vilest cup of coffee I have ever drunk in my life.

He took me into a vacant office, which was something of a mercy—that sense that the others in the squadroom were sneaking peeks at the prematurely balding editor in the drippy tweeds was probably paranoid, but it was pretty strong just the same.

To make a long story even longer, about forty-five minutes after the wirephotos had arrived, and about fifteen minutes after Detweiller had arrived (not handcuffed, but flanked by two burly men in blue-suits), the plainclothesman who had been dispatched to the House of Flowers after my original call arrived. He had been on the other side of town all afternoon.

They had left Detweiller alone in a small interrogation room, Tyndale told me, to soften him up—to get him thinking all sorts of nasty thoughts. The plainclothesman who had

verified the fact that Detweiller was indeed still working at the House of Flowers was looking at the "Sacrifice Photos" when Chief Iverson came out of his office and headed for the interrogation room where Detweiller was being kept.

"Jesus," the plainclothesman said to Iverson, "these look almost real, don't they?"

Iverson stopped. "Do you have any reason to believe they aren't?" he asked.

"Well, when I went into that flower-shop this morning to check on that guy Detweiller, this dude getting the informal heart-surgery was sitting off to one side behind the counter, playing solitaire and watching Ryan's Hope on TV."

"Are you sure of that?" Iverson demanded.

The plainclothesman tapped the first of the "Sacrifice Photos," where the face of the "victim" was clearly shown. "No mistake," he said. "This guy."

"Well why in God's name didn't you say he was there?" Iverson demanded, no doubt with visions of Detweiller bringing charges of false and malicious detainment beginning to dance dolefully in his head.

"Because no one asked me about this guy," the detective said, reasonably enough. "I was supposed to verify Detweiller, which I did. If somebody had asked me to verify this guy, I would have. No one did. See you." And he walked away, leaving Iverson holding the bag.

So that was that.

I looked at Tyndale.

Tyndale looked back at me.

After a moment or two he softened. "For whatever it's worth, Mr. Kenton, that particular photo did look real...real as hell. But so do the effects in some of these horror movies. There's one guy—Tom Savini—and the effects he does—"

"So they let him go." A dread was surfacing inside my head like one of those little Russian submarines the Swedes are never quite able to trap.

"For whatever else it's worth, your ass is covered with three sets of skivvies and four sets of pants, the middle two sets iron-clad," Tyndale said, and then added, with a sobriety that was positively Alexander Haigian: "I'm speaking legally-wise, you understand. You acted in good faith, as a citizen. If the guy could prove malice, that would be one thing...but hell, you didn't even know him."

The submarine came up a little more. Because I felt right then like I was starting to know him, Ruth, and my feelings about Carlos Detweiller were not then and are not now anything I would describe as jolly or benign.

"Besides, it's never the informant they want to sue for false arrest anyway—it's the cop who came and read them their rights and then took them downtown in a car with no doorhandles in the back doors."

Informant. That was the source of the dread. The submarine was all the way up, floating on the surface like a dead fish in the moonlight. Informant. I didn't know Carlos Detweiller from a psychic begonia...but he knew something about me. Not that I was the head of the Brown University literary soci ety, or that I'm prematurely balding, or that I'm engaged to marry a pretty miss from Pasadena named Ruth Tanaka...not any of those things (and please God, not my home address, never my home address), but he knows I'm the editor who had him taken into custody for a murder he did not commit.

"Do you know," I asked him, "if Iverson or anyone else at the Central Falls Police Department mentioned me to him by name?"

Tyndale lit a cigarette. "No," he said, "but I'm pretty sure no one there did."

"Why not?"

"It would have been unprofessional. When you're building a case— even one that dies as fast as this one did—every name the perp doesn't know or even might not know becomes a poker chip."

Any relief I might have felt was short-lived.

"But the guy would have to be pretty dumb not to know. Unless, that is, he mailed the photos to every publisher in New York. Think he might have done that?"

"No," I said dismally. "No other publisher in New York would have responded to his query letter in the first place."

"I see."

Tyndale was up, clearing away the styrofoam coffee cups, making those end-of-the-party gestures that meant he was hoping I'd put an egg in my shoe and beat it.

"One more question and I'll get out of your hair," I said. "The other photos were obvious fakes. Pitiful. How come they look so bad and these other fakes look so damn good?"

"Maybe Detweiller himself set up the 'Sakred Seance' photos and someone else—Central Fall's answer to Tom Savini, say—made up the 'sakrifice victim.' Or maybe Detweiller did them all and purposely made the other ones look bad so you'd take these more seriously."

"Why would he do that?"

"So you'd stub your toe just the way you have, maybe. Maybe that's how he gets off."

"But he got arrested in the process!"

He looked at me, almost pityingly. "Here's a guy who's in a bar, Mr. Kenton, and he's got these cigarette loads. So just for a joke, he loads up one of his buddy's cigarettes while his buddy's in the john or picking out some tunes on the juke. Seems to him like the funniest idea in the world at the time, even though the buddy's sense of humor only begins when a load explodes in someone else's cigarette, and the guy doing the loading now should know it. So the buddy comes back, and pretty soon he gets to the loaded pill. Takes two puffs and ka-bang! Tobacco all over his face, powderburns on his fingers, and he spills his beer in his lap. And his buddy—his previous buddy—is sitting there on the next stool, just about laughing himself into a hemorrhage. Do you see all that?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly, because I did.

"Now the guy loading the cigarette was not a feeb, although I got to say that in my own personal estimation a guy who thinks loading another guy's cigarette is funny is a little bit deficient in the sensa-yuma department. But even if his sensa-yuma starts with some guy getting the shit scared out of him and spilling his beer all over his balls, you'd think a guy who wasn't a feeb would be at least interested enough in keeping his teeth inside his head not to do it. Yet they do. They do it all the fucking time. Now, being a literary man—"

(He obviously didn't know about Gash Me, My Darling, Ants from Hell, and the forthcoming Flies from Hell, Ruth)

"—can you tell me why he goes ahead, and ends up picking his teeth up offa the bar on account of he might be able to hawk the fillings?"

"Because he has no sense of futurity," I said dismally, and for the first time, Ruth, I felt as if I could really see Carlos Detweiller.

"Huh? I don't know that word."

"He doesn't know—isn't able to see ahead to the outcome."

"Yeah, you're a literary man, all right. I couldn't have said it that good in a thousand years."

"And that's my answer?"

"That's your answer." He clapped me on the shoulder and led me toward the door. "Go home, Mr. Kenton. Have a drink, a shower, and then another drink. Watch some TV. Get a night's sleep. You did your duty as a citizen, for Christ's sake. Most people would have just tossed those pictures aside...or saved them for their scrapbooks. That sounds weird, but I'm a police-type guy, not a literary-type guy, and I know that some people do that, too. Go home. Forget it. And content yourself with this—if the guy's book is as bad as you said, you just sent him one hell of a rejection slip."

So I did just what he said, m'darling—went home, had a drink, had a shower, had a meal, had another drink, watched

TV, went to bed. Then after about three hours in the rack with no sleep—I kept seeing that picture, with the slit in the chest and the dripping heart—I got up, had about three more drinks, watched a John Wayne movie called Wake of the Red Witch on TV (John Wayne looks a lot better in a GI helmet than he does in a diving helmet, I want to tell you), went to bed again, and woke up with a hangover.

It's been a couple of days since all of this went down, and I think— think—that things are beginning to return to normal, both at Zenith House and inside my head. I think (think) it's over—but it's going to be one of those Incidents that haunt me all my life, I guess, like the dreams I used to have as a kid in which I stood up to salute the flag and my pants fell down. Or, even better, there was the time Bill Gelb, my illustrious co-editor at Zenith, told me about. He said he told this joke to a guy at a cocktail party: How do you stop five black guys from raping a white chick? Answer: give them a bas ketball. "I thought the guy I told it to just had a good tan until he threw his drink in my face and walked away," Bill said. That's the kind of story I could never tell on myself, which may be one of the reasons I haven't lost all of my respect for Bill, although he's a bigoted, lazy, horse's ass. All of which is to say I feel sort of like a horse's ass...but at least it's over. If all of this seems to make me a hysteric—someone who would eagerly testify at the Salem witch-trials—please write and break our engagement soonest...because if that's the case, I wouldn't marry me either.

As for me, I'm sort of clinging to what Tyndale said—that I acted in good faith as a citizen. The one thing I'll not do is send you the photos, which were returned to me today. They might give you the sort of dreams I've been having—and those dreams are definitely ungood. I've come to the conclusion that all special effects wizards must be frustrated surgeons. In fact, if Roger gives me the okay, I'm going to burn them.

I love you, Ruth.

Your adoring horse's ass,
John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/2/81

MESSAGE: Go ahead and burn them. I never want to hear about Carlos Detweiller again.

Listen, John—a little excitement's fine, but if we don't start some action here at Zenith, we're all going to be looking for jobs. I've heard that Apex may be hunting buyers. Which is like looking for dodo birds or pterodactyls. We've *got* to have a book or books that will make some noise by this summer, and that means we better start looking yesterday. Start shaking the trees, okay?

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Tree-shaking

What trees? Zenith House exists on the Great Plains of American publishing, and you damned well know it.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/3/81

MESSAGE: Find a tree or find a job. That's all there is, sweets.

Roger

February 4, 1981 Mr. John "Judas Priest" Kenton
Zenith Asshole-House, Publishers of Kaka
490 Avenue of Dog-Shit NewYork, New York 10017

Dear Judas,

This is the thanks I get for giving you my book. Okay, I understand. I should have known what to expect. You think you are SO SMART. Okay. I understand. You are really nothing but a dirty betraying bastard. How much have you stolen. Plenty, I would guess. You think you are SO SMART but you are nothing but a "Warped Plank" in "the GREAT FLOOR OF THE UNIVERSE." There are ways to deal with GUYS LIKE YOU. You probably think I am going to come and get you. But I am not. I would not "dirty my hands with your dirt," as Mr. Keen used to say. But I can fix you if I want. And I want! I WANT!!!!

Meantime you have spoiled everything here so I suppose you are satisfied. That doesn't matter. I have gone West. I would say "fuck you" but who would. Not me. I wouldn't even if I was a girl and you were Richard Gear. I wouldn't if you was some really neat girl with a good build.

Well I am going away but my material is copywright and I just hope you know what copywright is even if you don't know "shit" from "shoe-polish." So you just put that in your pipe and smoke it all the day long Mr. Judas Kenton. Goodbye.

I hate you,
Carlos Detweiller
In Transit
U.S. of A.

February 7, 1981

Dear Ruth,

I had sort of expected a "fuck-you" letter from Carlos Detweiller—it was in the back of my mind, anyway—and I got a dilly just the other day. I employed Zenith House's creaky pre-World War I Xerox machine to make a copy, and have enclosed it with this letter. In his anger he is almost lyrical—I especially like the line about me being a warped plank in the floor of the universe...a phrase even Carlyle might admire. He misspelled Richard Gere's name, but maybe that was artistic license. On the whole, I'd say I feel relieved—it's over, at least. The guy has struck out for the Great American West, undoubtedly with his rose-cutting shears slung low on one hip (on one rose-hip? oh, forget it).

"Yeah, but is he really gone?" you ask. The answer is, yes he is.

I got the letter yesterday and rang up Barton Iverson of the Central Falls Police almost at once (after getting Roger's grudging approval for the long distance, I might add). I thought Iverson would go along with my request to check matters out, and he did. Seems he too thought the "sakrifice photos" were too real for comfort, and the latest Detweiller communication does have a rather threatening tone. He sent a man named Riley—the same man who went before, I think—to check out Carlos, and he (Iverson, not Riley) called me back in ninety minutes. It seems that Detweiller served his notice almost right after being released from custody, and the Barfield woman has even advertised for a new florist's assistant in the local newspapers.

One mildly interesting thing: Riley checked on the guy in the "sakrifice photos," and came up with a name I know: It was Mr. Norville Keen, the same guy, I'm pretty sure, that Detweiller mentioned in his first two letters ("Why describe a guest when you can see that guest," and other pearls of wisdom). The cop asked her a few questions about the staging of those photos, and the Barfield woman clammed up, ka-bang, just like that. Asked him if it was an official investigation, or what. It isn't, of course, so that was that...and in my mind, the whole subject is closed. Iverson told me that Riley can't "make" the Barfield woman from any of the photos, so there was no handle to question her further...not that anyone there in Central Falls really wants to, I think. Iverson was very frank with me. "Let sleeping weirdos lay," was what he actually said, and I agree two hundred per cent.

If the new Anthony LaScorbia novel turns out to be Plants from Hell, though, I'm quitting.

I'll write you a more normal letter later in the week, I hope, but I thought you'd want to know how it all turned out. Meanwhile, I'm back to spending my nights on my novel and my days looking for a bestseller we can buy for $2,500. As I believe President Lincoln once said, "Good fucking luck, turkey."

Meantime, thanks for your phone call, and your last missive. And in answer to your question, yeah, I'm also H*O*R*N*Y.

My love,
John

February 19, 1981

Dear Mr. Kenton,

You don't know me, but I sort of know you. My name is Roberta Solrac, and I am an avid reader of Anthony LaScorbia's series of novels. Like Mr. LaScorbia, I fe el that ecology is about to revolt!!! Anyway, I wrote Mr. LaScorbia a "fan letter" last month and he answered me! I was very excited and honored, so I sent him a dozen roses. He said he was excited and honored (to get the roses) as no one had ever sent him flowers before.

Anyway, in our correspondence, he m entioned your name and said you were responsible for his literary triumphs. I can't send you roses as I am "broke," but I am sending you a small plant for your office, via UPS. It is supposed to bring good luck.

Hope this finds you well, and keep up the good work!!!

Yours most sincerely, Roberta Solrac

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: Ongoing insanity

Take a look at the enclosed letter, Roger. Then spell "Solrac" backwards. I think I really am going crazy. What did I do to deserve this guy?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: Maybe you're jumping at shadows. If not, what do you want to do about it? Re-open things with the Central Falls P.D.? Assuming this is Detweiller—and I admit the last name soars into the outer limits of the coincidental and the style bears a certain similarity, although it's obviously a different typewriter—it's just, if I may wax alliterative, a harmless helping of little-kid harassment. My advice is forget it. If "Roberta Solrac" sends you a plant in the mail, dump it down the incinerator chute. It's probably poison ivy. You're

letting this get on your nerves, John. I tell you this seriously: *Forget it.*

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger
f r o m: John
r e: "Roberta Solrac"

Poison ivy, my ass. The guy worked in a greenhouse. It's probably deadly nightshade, or belladonna, or something like that.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton DATE: 2/23/81

MESSAGE: I thought about shagging my butt down the hall to talk to you, but I'm expecting a call from Harlow "The Axeman Cometh" Enders in a few minutes, and don't want to be out of my office. But maybe it's better that I write this down anyway, because you don't seem to really believe anything unless it's in print.

John, let this go. The Detweiller thing is over. I know the whole business knocked you for a loop—hell, it did me, too—but you've got to let it go. We have got some serious problems here in-house, just in case you didn't know it. There's going to be a re-evaluation of what we're up to in June, and what were up to is not much. This means we could all be out on our asses in September. Our "year of grace" has begun to shrink. Quit worrying about Detweiller and for Christ's sake find something I can publish that will make money.

I can't make myself clearer. I love you, John, but let this go and get back to work, or I'm going to have to make some hard choices.

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Riddley
f r o m: John Kenton r e: Possible incoming package

I have an idea that I may be receiving a U P S package from somewhere in the midwest during the next week to ten days. The sender's name is Roberta Solrac. If you see such a package, make sure I don't. In other words, dump it immediately down the nearest incinerator chute. I suspect you know most of what there is to know about the Detweiller business. This may be associated with that, and the contents of the package could be dangerous. Unlikely, but in the realm of possibility.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

to: John Kenton from: Riddley
re: Possible incoming package

Thanking you,

John Kenton

Yassuh, Mist Kenton!

Riddley / Mail Room

from

TH E **S A K RE D B O OK OF C A R LO S**

SAKRED MONTH OF FEBBA (Entry #64)

I know how to get him. I have set things in

motion, praise Abbalah. Praise Green Demeter. I'll get

them all. Green Green " must be seen." Ha! You Ju d a s !

Little do you know! But I know! All about your girlfriend,

too—only girlfriend is now girlFIEND, little do you know

what she is up to! T h e re is another mule kicking in your

stall, Mr. Judas Big-Shot Editor! OUIJA says this mu l e 's

name is GARY! In my dreams I have seen them and

G A RY is HAIRY! Not like you, you wimpy little

J U DAS! Soon I'm sending you a present! Ever yone pros

p e rs! Ever y Judas safe in the arms of Abbalah! Come

Abbalah! COME GREAT DEM E T E R !

COME GREEN!

PART III

February 25

Dear Ruth,

I've got a case of the mean reds, so I thought I'd pass some of them on— see the enclosed Xeroxes, concluding with a typically impudent communication from Riddley, he of the coal-black skin and three hundred huge white teeth.

You'll notice that Roger kicked my ass good and hard— not much like Roger, and doubly sobering for that very reason. I don't think one has to be very paranoid to see that he's talking about the possibility of firing me. If I'd talked this out with him over martinis at Flaherty's after work, I doubt very much if he would have come down so hard, and of course I had no idea he was waiting on a call from Enders. I undoubtedly deserved the ass-kicking I got—I haven't really been doing my job—but he has no idea of the scare that letter threw into me when I realized it was Detweiller again. I'm too goddam thin-skinned for my own good, that's what Roger thinks...but Detweiller is scary for other, less easily grasped reasons. Being the idée that's gotten fixe in some crazy's head has got to be one of the most

uncomfortable feelings in the world—if I knew Jody Foster, I think I'd give her a jingle and tell her I know exactly how she feels. There's an almost palpable texture of slime about Detweiller's communications, and oh boy, oh yeah, I wish I could get him out of my head, but I still have nightmares about those pictures.

Anyway, I have taken care of matters as well as I can, and no, I have no intention of calling Central Falls. We have an editorial meeting tomorrow. I'll try to the best of my limited abilities to get back on the beam...except at Zenith House the beam is so narrow it almost doesn't exist.

I love you, I miss you, I long for your return. Maybe you being gone is part of the problem. Not to make you feel guilty.

All my love,

John

From the journals of Riddley Walker

2/23/81

Like a stone thrown into a large and stagnant pond' the Detweiller affair has caused any number of ripples at my place of employment. I thought that all of them had gone by; yet this afternoon one more rolled past' and who is to say even that one will be the last?

I have included a Xerox of an exceedingly curious memo I received from Kenton at 2:35 P.M. plus my own reply (the memo came just after Gelb left'in something of a huff; why he should have been in a huff eludes me since today he brought his own dice and I did him the courtesy of not even checking them' but Ah g'iss Ah woan *nevuh* understand dese white folks). I think I have covered the Detweiller affair to a nicety in these pages' but I should add that it never surprised me in the least that Kenton was the one to bring Detweiller' the rogue comet' into the erratic (and' I fear' degenerating) orbit of Zenith House. He is brighter than Sandra Jackson; brighter than that crap-shooting' Ivy League tie-wearing devil William Gelb; f*ar* brighter than Herbert Porter (Porter' as previously noted' is not above

wandering into Ms. Jackson's office after she has left for the day and sniffing the seat of her office chair—a strange man' but be it not for me to judge)' and the only one of the staff who *might* be capable of recognizing a commercial book if it came within his purview. Right now he is eaten up with guilt and embarrassment over *l'affaire Detweiller,* and can see only that he made a rather comic f*aux pas.* He would be incapable of seeing that his decision to even l*ook* at the Detweiller book demonstrated that his editorial ears are still open' and still attuned to that sweetest of all tones—the celestial notes of Sweda cash registers in drugstores and book emporia ringing up sales' even if it was pointed out to him.

Incapable of seeing that it proves he's still trying.

The others have given up.

Anyway' here is this enchanting memo—between its lines I hear a man whose nerve is temporarily shot' a man who *might* be capable of facing a lion but who now cannot even look at a mouse; a man who is'in consequence' shrieking "Eeeek! Get rid of it! Get rid of it!" and swatting at it with the handiest broom' which in *dis* case jus happen t'be Riddley' who dus' de awfishes an wipe de windows an delivah de mail. Yassuh' Mist Kenton' I git rid of it fo you! I sholy goan get rid of dat hoodoo Solrac woman's package if she sen one!

Maybe.

On the other hand' maybe John Kenton should have to face up to the consequences of his own actions—swat his own mouse. After all' if you don't swat your own' maybe you never really know what a

harmless little thing a mouse is...and is it not possible that Kenton's useful days as an editor may be over if he cannot stare down such occasional crazies as Carlos "Roberta" Detweiller?

I shall ponder the matter. I think there is a very good chance no package will come' but I'll ponder it all the same.

2/27/81

Something from the mysterious "Roberta Solrac" actually came today! I didn't know whether to be amused or disgusted by my own reaction' which was staring'elemental gut-terror followed by an almost insane urge to put the thing down the incinerator' exactly as Kenton's note had instructed. The *physicality* of my reaction as soon as my eye fell on the return address and connected the name there with Kenton's memo was striking. I had a sudden spasm of shudders. Goosebumps raced up my back.I heard a clear' ringing tone in my ears' and I could feel the hair stiffening on my head.

This symphony of physiological atavism lasted no more than five seconds and then it subsided—but it left me as shaken as a sudden deep lance of pain in the area of the heart. Floyd would sneer and call it "a nigger reaction'" but it was no such thing. It was a *human* reaction. Not to the thing itself—the contents of the package were something of an anticlimax

after all the sound and fury—but' I am convinced' to the hands which placed the lid on the small white cardboard box in which the plant came; the hands which tied twine around that box and then cut a brown paper shopping bag in which to wrap the box for mailing' the hands which taped and labelled and carried. Detweiller's hands.

Am I speaking of telepathy? Yes...and no. It might be fairer to say that I am speaking of a kind of passive psychokinesis.Dogs shy away from people with cancer; they smell it on them. So' at least' claims my dear old Aunt Olympia.In the same way I smelled Detweiller all over that box'and now I understand Kenton's upset better and have a good deal more sympathy for him. I think Carlos Detweiller must be dangerously insane...but the plant itself is no deadly nightshade or belladonna or Adder Toadstool (although it may have been any or all of those things in Detweiller's feverish mind' I suppose). It's only a very small and very tired-looking common ivy in a red clay pot.

If not for the "nigger reaction" (Floyd Walker)—or the "human reaction" (his brother Riddley)—I might really have dumped the thing...but after that fit of the shakes'it seemed to me I had to go through with opening the package or deem myself less a man. I did so' in spite of any number of gruesome images—high explosive rigged to special pressure-tapes' noxious floods of black widow spiders' a litter of baby copperheads. And there it was' just a small ivy-plant with yellow-edged leaves (four of them)

nodding from one tired' sagging stem. The soil itself is waxy brown. It smells swampy and unpleasant.

There was a little plastic sign stuck in the earth which read:

H I !
M Y N A M E I S Z E N I T H
I A M A G I F T T O J O H N
F R O M R O B E R T A

It was that flash of fear which drove me to open the package. Similarly' it's that same flash which has decided me against making sure that Kenton gets it after all' which would have been easy enough to do ("*Dat* plant' Mist Kenton? Oh' *drat!* I g'iss I fo'got whatchoo said. I am de mos f *'gitten'est* man!"). Let the ripples end; let him forget Detweiller' if that's what he wants. I've put Zenith the Common Ivy on a shelf in my janitorial-cum-mailroom cubicle—a shelf well above Kenton's eye-level (not that he stops in much anyway' unlike Gelb with his dice fixation). I'll keep it until it dies' and then I really *will* dump it down the incinerator chute. That will be the end of Detweiller f*o sho.*

Got fifty pages done on the novel over the weekend. Gelb now owes me $75.40.

From *The New York Post,* page 1, March 4, 1981:

INSANE GENERAL ESCAPES OAK COVE ASYLUM, KILLS THREE!!

(Special to the *Post*) Major General (ret.) Anthony R. Hecksler, known to the commandos and partisans who followed him across France during World War II as "Iron-Guts" Hecksler, escaped from Oak Cove Asylum late last night, stabbing two orderlies and a nurse to death in his bid for freedom. General Hecksler was remanded to Oak Cove in the small upstate town of Cutlersville twenty-seven months ago, following his acquittal, by reason of insanity, on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and assault with intent to kill. His victim was Albany bus driver Herman T. Schneur, whom Hecksler claimed in a signed statement to be "one of the twelve North American foremen of the antichrist."

The Oak Cove dead have been identified as Norman Ableson, twenty-six; John Piet, forty; and Alicia Penbroke, thirty-four. State Police Lieutenant Arthur P. Ford was surprisingly gloomy when asked if he expected to recapture General Hecksler quickly. "We hope for a quick arrest, naturally," he said, "but this is a man who trained guerilla units in World War II and in Korea, and who was consulted on more than one occasion by General Westmoreland in Viet Nam. He's seventy-two now, but still strong and amazingly agile, as his escape from Oak Cove shows." Ford indicated he was referring to Hecksler's probable method of escape—a leap from a second floor window in the Oak Cove Administration Wing to the garden below (see photographs

on pages 2, 3, and Center Section). Ford went on to caution everyone within the immediate area to be on the lookout for the mad General, whom he described as "extremely clever, extremely dangerous, and extremely paranoid."

In a brief press interview, Ellen K. Moors, the doctor in charge of Hecksler's case, agreed. "He had a great many enemies," she said, "or so he imagined. His paranoid delusions were extremely complex, but he never lost track of the score. He was, in his way, a model inmate...but he never lost track of the score."

A source close to the investigation says Hecksler may have stabbed Ableson, Piet, and Pembroke to death with a pair of barber's shears. The source told the *Post* that there was no outcry; all three were stabbed in the throat, commando-style.

(Related story p. 12)

PART IV

From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/25/81

What a difference a day makes!

Yesterday Herb Porter was his usual self—fat' slovenly' smoking a cigar as he stood by the water-cooler' explaining to Kenton and Gelb how the great train of the world would run if he' Herbert Porter' were the engineer. The man is a walking *Reader's Digest* of rabbit-punch solutions' a compendium of declarative answers which are delivered amid the effluvium of cigar smoke and exquisitely bad breath. Close the borders and keep out the spies and wetbacks! End abortion on demand! Build more prisons! Upgrade possession of marijuana to a felony once again! Sell biochemical stocks! Buy cable-TV issues!

He is' in his way—or was' until today—a wonderful man: rounded and perfect in his assurances' plated with prejudices' caprisoned about with cant' and possessed of just enough native wit to hold a job in a place like this' Porter is an evocation of the Great American Median. Even his occasional surreptitious expeditions into Sandra Jackson's office to sniff the seat of her chair please me—an endearing little loophole in the walking castle of complacency that is Massa Po'tuh.

Oh' but today! What a different Herbert Porter crept into my janitorial cubbyhole today! The complacent'ruddy face had become pallid and trembling. The blue eyes shifted so regularly from side to side that Porter looked like a man watching a tennis match even when he was trying to stare right at me. His lips were so shiny with spittle that they looked almost varnished. And while he was of course still fat' he also looked as if he had somehow lost his surface tension—as if the essential Herb Porter had shrunk away from the borders of his skin' leaving that skin to sag in places where it had been previously stretched smooth.

"He's out'" Porter whispered.

"Who's dat' Mist Po'tuh?" I asked. I was genuinely curious; I could not imagine what mighty sling or engine could have breached such a gap in Castle Herbert. Although I suppose I should have guessed.

He proffered me the paper—the P*ost,* of course. He's the only one around here who reads it. Kenton and Wade read the T*imes,* Gelb and Jackson *bring* the T*imes* but secretly read the *Daily News* (the hand that rocks the cradle may rule the world' but de han which empty de white folks' wastebaskets know de *secrets* of de worl)' but the P*ost w*as made for fellows such as Herb Porter. He plays Wingo religiously and says if he ever wins a bundle he is going to buy a Winnebago' paint the word **W I N G O B A G O** on the side' and tour the country. I took it' opened it' and read the headline. "The General's escaped'" he whispered. His eyes stopped bouncing back and forth for a moment and

he stared at me in dismay and utter horror. "It's as if that damned Detweiller cursed us. The General's escaped *and I rejected his book*!"

"Now' now' Mist Po'tuh'" I said. "Ain't no need to take on so. Man lak dis prob'ly got fo-five dozen scores to settle befo he git to you."

"But I could be number one'" he whispered. "After all' I rejected his goddam *book."*

It was true'and it is ironic how two such fundamentally different men as Kenton and Porter have managed to get themselves into exactly the same situation this late winter—each the target of a rejected author (Detweiller's rejection a bit more dramatic than that of the Major-General' granted' but that was indubitably Detweiller's own fault) who just happens to be insane.The difference—I know it'even if no one else does (and I believe Roger Wade might)—is that' while Kenton thought there might actually be the germ of a book in Detweiller's obsession'Porter knew better concerning the General's.But Porter is one of those men who has read o m n ivo ro u s ly—and vicariously—about Wo rld War II' that Picke t t ' s Charge of western man (western *white* man) in the 20th century' and he knew who Hecksler was...in a war filled with military celebrities Hecksler was' granted' of the Hollywood Squares type (if you see what I mean)'but to Porter he was *somebody.* So he asked to see the completed manuscript of Tw*enty Psychic Garden Flowers* in spite of the abysmal outline' thereby encouraging a man who was' by the quality and content of his own written words' a palpable psychotic. I felt that the

result and his present terror' although unforeseen' were partly his own fault.

I allowed as how it was true that he could be number one on the General's hit list (if indeed the poor madman is doing anything other than cowering in drainage ditches or scouring alley garbage cans for offal at this point)' but reiterated that I thought it unlikely. I added that he might well be caught before he could get within fifty miles of New York City even if he had decided to come after Porter' and finished by telling him that many psychotics released suddenly into an uncontrolled environment took their own lives...although I did not say so in exactly those words.

Po r ter re ga rded me suspiciously for a moment and then said' "Riddley—don't take offense at this—"

"Nawsah!"

"Have you r*eally* been to college?"

"Y*assah!"*

"And you took psychology courses?"

"Yassah' I sho did."

"*Abnormal* psychology?"

"Yassah' and I'se pow'ful familier wid de suicidial syndrome associated wid de paranoid-psychotic personality! Why' dat Gen'l Hecksler could be slittin' his wrists or garglin' wid a lightbulb even while we's heah talkin' Mist Po'tuh!"

He looked at me for a long time and then said'"If you've been to college' Riddley' why do you talk that way?"

"What way is dat' Mist Po-tuh?"

He regarded me for a moment longer and then said' "Never mind."
He leaned close—close enough so I could smell cheap cigars' hair tonic' and the graywater stench of fear. "Can you get me a gun?"

For a moment I was literally without a response—which is like saying (Floyd would' anyway) that China was for a moment without manpower. I had an idea that he had changed the subject completely' and that what I had heard as *Can you get me a gun?* had actually been *Can you get me some fun,* as in ho. Definition of a ho: dahk-skin woman who do it fo money on account of de food-stamps is gone and de las fix be cookin in de spoon. My response was to either fall down' shrieking wildly with laughter' or to throttle him until his face was as purple as his tie. Then' belatedly' I began to understand he really *had* said gun...but in the meantime he had taken the overload in my mental switchboard for refusal. His face fell.

"You're sure?" he asked. "I thought that up there in Harlem—"

"Ah lives in Dobbs Ferry' Mist' Po'tuh!"

He merely waved this aside' as if we both knew my Dobbs Ferry address was just a convenient fiction I maintained—that I might even actually go there after work' but of course was drawn back to the velvety reaches beyond 110th as soon as the sun went down.

"Ah g'iss I could git you a gun' Mist' Po'tuh' suh'" I said' "but it wouldn't be no better or wuss'n one you could git yo'sef—a .32...maybe a .38..." I winked at

him. "And a gun you buy under de countuh in a bah' cain't never tell it ain't goan blow up in yo face fust time you pulls de triggah!"

"I don't want anything like that' anyway'" Porter said morosely. "I want something with a laser sight. And exploding bullets. Did you ever see *Day of the Jackal,* Riddley?"

"Yassah' and it sho was fine!"

"When he shot the watermelon...*plowch*!" Porter tossed his arms wide to indicate how the watermelon had exploded when the assassin tried an exploding bullet on it in T*he Day of the Jackal'* and one of his hands struck the ivy sent to Kenton by the mysterious Roberta Solrac. I had all but forgotten it' although it's been less than two weeks since I put it up there.

I tried to assure Porter again that he was probably far from the top of Hecksler's perhaps infinite list of pet paranoias' and that the man was' after all' seventy-two.

"You don't know some of the stuff he did in Big Two'" Porter said' his eyes beginning to move hauntedly from side to side again. "If those guys who hired the Jackal had hired Hecksler instead' DeGaulle never would have died in the rack."

He wandered off then' and I was glad to see him go. The smell of cigars was beginning to make me feel mildly ill. I took down Zenith the Common Ivy and looked at him (it is ridiculous to assign a male pronoun to an ivy' and yet I did it automatically—I' who usually write with the shrewish care of a French *petit bourgeoise* housewife picking over fruit in the

marketplace). I began this entry by saying what a difference a day makes. In the case of Zenith the Common Ivy' what a difference *five* days has made. The sagging stem has straightened and thickened' the four yellowish leaves have become almost wholly green' and two new ones have begun to unfurl. All of this with absolutely no help from me at all. I watered it and noticed two other things about my good old buddy Zenith—first' it's even put out its first tendril—it barely reaches to the lip of the cheap plastic pot'but it's there—and second'that swampy' unpleasant smell seems to have disappeared. In fact both the plant and the soil in which he is potted smell quite sweet.

Perhaps it's a psychic ivy. If General Hecksler shows up here at good old 490 Park' I must be sure to ask him' hee-hee!

Got twenty pages done on the novel this week—not much' but think (hope!) I am approaching the halfway point.

Gelb' who had a modest run of luck yesterday' tried to push it today—this was about an hour before Porter hopped in' looking for armaments. Gelb now owes me $81.50.

March 8, 1981

Dear Ruth,

Just lately you've been harder to reach on the phone than the President of the United States—I swear to God I'm getting to hate your answering machine! I must confess that tonight—the third night of "Hi, this is Ruth and I can't come to the phone right now, but..."—I got a little nervous and called the other number you gave me—the super. If he hadn't told me he'd seen you going out around five with a big load of books under your arm, I think I might have asked him to check and make sure you were okay. I know, I know, it's just the time difference, but things have gotten so paranoid here lately that you wouldn't believe it. Paranoid? Weird is a better word, maybe. We'll probably talk before you receive this, making ninety per cent of this letter obsolete (unless I send it Federal Express, which makes long distance look like an austerity measure), but if I don't narrate it by some means or other I think I may explode. I understand from Herb Porter, who is nearly apoplectic (a condition I sympathize with more than I would heretofore have believed, following l'affair Detweiller), that General Hecksler's escape and the murders which attended it have made the national news the last two nights, but I assume you haven't seen it—or didn't make the connection—or I would have heard from you via Ma Tinkerbell ere now (prolix as ever, you see—would that I could be as succinct as Zenith's faithful custodian Riddley!). If you haven't heard, the enclosed Post clipping (I didn't bother to include the centerfold photo of the asylum with the obligatory dotted

line marking the dotty General's likely route of escape and the obligatory X's marking the locations of his victims) will bring you up to date as quickly and luridly as possible.

You may remember that I mentioned Hecksler to you in a letter only six weeks ago—something like that, anyway. Herb rejected his book, Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers, and provoked a barrage of paranoid hate-mail. Joking aside, his bloody escape has created a real atmosphere of unease here at Z.H. I had a drink with Roger Wade after work tonight in Four Fathers (Roger claims that the owner, a genial man named Ginelli with a soft voice and these odd, gleeful eyes, is a mafioso) and told him about Herb's visit to me that afternoon. I pointed out to Herb that it was ridiculous for him to be as frightened as he obviously is (it's sort of funny—under his steely Joe Pyne Exterior, the resident Neanderthal turns out to be Walter Mitty after all) and Herb agreed. Then, after a certain amount of patently artificial small talk, he asked me if I knew where he could get a gun. Mystified—sometimes your ob'dt correspondent is amazingly slow in making the obvious connections, m'dear—I mentioned the sporting goods store five blocks from here, at Park and 32nd.

"No," he said impatiently. "I don't want a shotgun or anything like that." Here he lowered his voice. "I want something I can carry around with me."

Roger nodded and said Herb had been into his office around two, feeling him out on the same subject.

"What did you say?" I asked him.

"I reminded him that the penalties for carrying concealed weapons without a permit in this state are damned severe," Roger said. "At which point Herb drew himself up to his full height (which is, Ruth, about fiveseven) and said, 'A man doesn't need a permit to protect himself, Roger.'"

"And then?"

"Then he walked out. And tried you. Probably tried Bill Gelb as well."

"Don't forget Riddley," I said.
"Ah, yes—and Riddley."
"Who might just be able to help him."

Roger ordered another bourbon, and I was thinking how much older than his actual forty-five he is coming to look when he suddenly grinned that boyish, winning grin that so charmed you when you first met him at that cocktail party in June of '80—the one at Gahan and Nancy Wilson's place in Connecticut, do you remember? "Have you seen Sandra Jackson's new toy?" he asked. "She's the one Herb should have gone to for black market munitions." Roger actually laughed out loud, a sound I have heard from him very seldom in the last eight months or so. Hearing it made me realize again, Ruth, how much I like and respect him—he could have been a really great editor somewhere—perhaps even in the Maxwell Perkins league. It seems a shame that he's ended up piloting such a leaky craft as Zenith House.

"She's got something called the Rainy Night Friend," he said, still laughing. "It's silver-plated, and almost the size of a mortar shell. Fucking thing fills her whole purse. There's a flashlight set into the blunt end. The tapered end emits a cloud of tear-gas when you press a button—only Sandra says that she spent an extra ten bucks to have the tear-gas canister replaced with Hi-Pro-Gas, which is a hopped-up version of Mace. In the middle of this device, Johnny boy, is a pull-ring that sets off a high-decibel siren. I did not ask for a demonstration. They would have evacuated the building."

"The way you describe it, it sounds as if she could use it as a dildo when there were no muggers around," I said.

He went off into gales of half-hysterical laughter. I joined him—it would have been impossible not to—but I was concerned for him, as well. He's very tired and very close to the edge of his endurance, I think—the parent corporation's steadily eroding support for the house has really started to get to him.

I asked him if something like the Rainy Night Friend was legal.

"I'm not a lawyer so I couldn't tell you for sure," Roger said. "My impression is that a woman who uses a tear-gas pen on a potential mugger or rapist is in a gray area. But Sandra's toy, loaded up with a Mace hybrid... no, I don't think something like that can be kosher."

"But she's got it, and she's carrying it," I said.

"Not only that, but she seems fairly calm about it all," Roger agreed.
"Funny—she was the one who was so scared when the General was sending his poison pen letters, and Herb hardly seemed aware any of it was going on...at least until the bus driver got stabbed. I think what freaked Sandra out before was that she'd never seen him."

"Yes," I said. "She even told me that once."

He paid the tab, waving away my offer to pay my half. "It's the revenge of the flower-people," he said. "First Detweiller, the mad gardener from Central Falls, and then Hecksler, the mad gardener from Oak Cove."

That gave me what the British mystery writers like to call a nasty start— talk about not making obvious connections! Roger, who is far from being anyone's fool, saw my expression and smiled.

"Didn't think of that, did you?" he asked. "It's just a coincidence, of course, but I guess it was enough to set off a little paranoid chime in Herb Porter's head—I can't imagine him getting so fashed otherwise. We could have the basis of a good Robert Ludlum novel here. The Horticultural Something-or-Other. Come on, let's get out of here."

"Convergence," I said as we hit the street.

"Huh?" Roger looked like someone coming back from a million miles away.

"The Horticultural Convergence," I said. "The perfect Ludlum title. Even the perfect Ludlum plot. It turns out, see, that Detweiller and Hecksler are actually brothers—no,

considering the ages, I guess father and son would be better—in the pay of the NKVD. And—"

"I've got to catch my bus, John," he said, not unkindly.

Well, I have my problems, dear Ruth (who knows better than you?), but realizing when I'm being a bore has never been one of them (except when I'm drunk). I saw him down to the bus stop and headed home.

The last thing he said was that the next we heard of General Hecksler would probably be a report of his capture...or his suicide. And Herb Porter would be disappointed as well as relieved.

"It isn't General Hecksler Herb and the rest of us have to be worried about," he said—his little burst of good humor had left him and he looked slumped and small, standing there at the bus stop with his hands jammed into the pockets of his trenchcoat. "It's Harlow Enders and the rest of the accountants who are going to get us. They'll stab us with their red pencils. When I think about Enders, I almost wish I had Sandra Jackson's Rainy Night Friend."

No progress on my novel this week—looking back over this epistle I see why—all this narrative that should have gone into Maymonth tonight went ended up here instead. But if I went on too long and in too much novelistic detail, don't chalk it all up to prolixity, my dear—over the last six months or so I have become a genuine Lonely Guy. Writing to you isn't as good as talking to you, and talking to you isn't as good as seeing you, and seeing you isn't as good as touching you and being with you (steam-steam! pant-pant!), but a person has to make do with what he has. I know you're busy, studying hard, but going so long without talking to you has got me sorta crazy (and on top of Detweiller and Hecksler, more crazy I do not need to be). I love you, my dear.

Missing you, needing you,

Dylan

March 9, 1981 Mr. Herbert Porter Designated Jew
Zenith House
490 Park Avenue New York, NY 10017

Dear Designated Jew,

Did you think I had forgotten you? I bet you did. Well, I didn't. A man doesn't forget the thief who rejected his book after stealing all of the good parts. And how you tried to discredit me. I wonder how you will look with your *penis* in your *ear*. Ha-ha. (But not a joke)
I am coming for you, "big boy."
Major General Anthony R.
Hecksler (Ret.)

P.S. Roses are red. Violets are blue. I am coming to castrate.
A Designated Jew. M.G.A.R.H. (Ret.)

MAILGRAM FROM MR. JOHN KENTON TO RUTH TANAKA

MS. RUTH TANAKA
10411 CRESCENT BOULEVARD
LOS ANGELES, CA 90024

MARCH 10, 1981

DEAR RUTH

THIS IS PROBABLY PRIMO STUPIDO BUT PARANOIA BEGETS PARANOIA AND I STILL
CAN'T RAISE YOU. FINALLY GOT PAST THAT BLANK-BLANK ANSWERING MACHINE
THIS MORNING TO YOUR ROOMMATE WHO SAID SHE HADN'T SEEN YOU LAST
TWO DAYS. SHE SOUNDED FUNNY. I HOPE ONLY STONED. CALL ME SOONEST OR
I'LL BE KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR THIS WEEKEND. LOVE YOU.

JOHN

March 10,1981
Dear John,

I imagine—no, I know—you must be wondering why you haven't heard from me much over the last three weeks. The reason is simple enough; I've been feeling guilty. And the reason I am writing now instead of calling is that I am a coward. Also I think, although you may not believe me when you read the rest of this,which is the hardest letter I've ever had to write, because I love you very much and want so much not to hurt you. All the same I suppose this will hurt and knowing I can't help it makes me cry.

John, I've met a man named Toby Anderson and have fallen head over heels in love with him. If it matters to you—and it probably won't—I met him in one of the two English Restoration drama courses I'm taking.I held him off as best as I could for a long time— I very much want and need

you to believe that—but by midFebruary I just couldn't hold him off any longer. My arms got tired.

The last three weeks or so have been a nightmare for me. I don't really expect you to sympathize with my position,but I hope you'll believe I am telling the truth. Although you're on the east coast and I'm three thousand miles away on the west,I felt as if I were sneaking around on you. And I was. I was! Oh, I don't mean in the sense that you might come home early from work one night and find me with To b y ,but I felt terrible all the same.I couldn't sleep,c o u l d n 't eat, couldn't do my yoga positions or the Jane Fonda Workout.My grades were slipping, but to hell with the grades—my heart was slipping.

I've been ducking your calls because I couldn't bear to hear your voice—it seemed to bring it all home to me—how I was lying and cheating and leading you on.

It all came to a head two nights ago when Toby showed me the lovely diamond engagement ring he had bought for me.

He said he wanted me to have it and he hoped I wanted to take it,but he said he couldn't give it to me even if I did until I talked or wrote to you.He's such an honorable man, John, and the irony is that under different circumstances I am sure you would like him very much.

I broke down and cried in his arms and before long his tears were mingled with mine. The upshot of it all was me saying I would be ready for him to slip that gorgeous love-ring on my finger by the end of the week.I think we are going to be married in June.

You see that in the end I took the coward's way out, writing instead of phoning,and it's still taken me the last two days to get this much down—I've cut every class and have practically put down roots in the library karel where I should be studying for a Transformational Grammar prelim.But to hell with Noam Chomsky and deep structure! And although you may not believe this either, each word of the letter you're reading has been like a lash across my heart.

If you want to talk to me, John—I'd understand if you didn't but you may—you could call me in a week...after you've had a chance to think all this over and get it into some kind of perspective.I am so used to your sweetness and charm and kindness,and so afraid you'll be angry and accusatory—but that is up to you and I'll just have to "take you as you are," I suppose. But you need that time to cool off and settle down,and I need some time,too. You should receive this on the eleventh. I'll be in my apartment from seven to nine-thirty on the nights of the eighteenth through the twenty-second,both expecting your call and dreading it. I won't want to speak to you before then, and I hope you understand—and I think maybe you will, you who were always the most understanding of men in spite of your constant self-deprecation.

One other thing—both Toby and I are in agreement about this: don't take it in your head to just suddenly jump on a plane and "wing your way into the golden west"—I wouldn't see you if you did. I'm not ready

to see you face to face, John—my feelings are still too much in flux and my self-image too much in a state of transition.We will meet again, yes. And dare I say that I even hope you will come to our wedding? I must dare,as I see I have written it down!

Oh,John,I do love you,and I hope this letter has not caused you too much pain—I even hope God has been good and you may have found your own "somebody" in the last couple of weeks—in the meantime,please know that you will always (always!) be somebody to me.

My love,

Ruth

PS—And although it is trite,it is also true: I hope we can always be friends.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

t o: Roger Wade
f r o m: John Kenton
r e: Resignation

I've been a trifle formal here because this really is a letter of resignation, Roger, memo form or no. I'll be leaving at the end of the day—will, in fact, begin cleaning out my desk as soon as I've finished this. I'd rather not go into my reasons—they are personal. I realize, of course, that leaving with no prior notice is very bad form. Should you choose to take the matter up with the Apex Corporation, I would be happy to pay a reasonable assessment. I'm sorry about this, Roger. I like and respect you a great deal, but this simply has to be.

From John Kenton's diary

March 16, 1981

I haven't tried to keep a diary since I was eleven years old, when my Aunt Susan—dead lo these many years—gave me a small pocket diary for my birthday. It was just a cheap little thing; like Aunt Susan herself, now that I think about it.

I kept that diary, off and on (mostly off) for almost three weeks. I might not get even that far this time, but it doesn't really matter. This was Roger's idea, and Roger's ideas are sometimes good.

I've junked the novel—oh, don't think I did anything melodramatic like casting it into the fire to commemorate the spontaneous combustion of My First Serious Love; I'm actually writing this first (and maybe last) entry in my diary on the backs of the manuscript pages. But junking a novel doesn't have anything to do with the actual pages, anyway; what's on the pages is just so much dead skin. The novel actually falls apart inside your head, it seems, like the parson's wonderful one-hoss shay. Maybe the only good thing about Ruth's cataclysmic letter is that it's put paid to my grandiose literary aspirations. Maymonth, by John Edward Kenton, sucked that fabled hairy bird.

Does one need to begin a diary with background information? This was not a question which crossed my mind when I was eleven—at least not that I recall. And in spite of the great shitload of English courses I've taken in my time, I don't recall ever attending one which covered the Protocol of Journals. Footnotes, synopses, outlines, the proper placement of modifiers, the correct form of the business letter—these were all things in which I took instruction. But on how to start a diary I am as blank as I am, say, on how to continue your life after its light just went out.

Here is my decision, after a full thirty seconds of weighty consideration: a little background information wouldn't hurt. My name, as mentioned above, is John Edward Kenton; I am twenty-six years of age; I attended Brown University, where I majored in English, served as President of the Milton Society, and was exceedingly full of myself; I believed that everything in my life would eventually turn out just fine; I have since learned better. My father is dead, my mother alive and well and living in Sanford, Maine. I have three sisters. Two are married; the third is living at home and will finish her senior year at Sanford High this June.

I live in a two-room Soho apartment which I thought quite pleasant until the last few days; now it seems drab. I work for a seedy book company which publishes paperback originals, most of them about giant bugs and Viet Nam veterans out to reform the world with automatic weapons. Three days ago I found out my girl has left me for another man. Some response to this seemed to be required, so I tried to quit my job. No sense trying to go into my mental state either then or now. It was none too calm to begin with, due to an outbreak of what I can only call Crazy Fever at work. I may elaborate on that business at some later date, but for the time being the importance of Detweiller and Hecksler seems to have receded far into the background.

If you have ever been abruptly left by someone you did and do love deeply, you'll know the sort of fugue I have been experiencing. If you haven't, you can't. Simple as that.

I keep wanting to say I feel the way I did when my father died, but I don't. Part of me (the part that, writer or not, constantly wants to make metaphors) would like to make it into a bereavement, and I believe Roger was partly right when he made that comparison at the mostly liquid dinner we had the night of my resignation, but there are other elements, too. It is a separation—as if someone told you that you could no longer have your favorite food, or use a drug to which you had become addicted. And there's something

worse. However you define the thing, I find that my own sense of self-esteem and self-worth have somehow gotten mixed up in it, and it hurts. It hurts a lot. And it seems to hurt all the time. I always used to be able to escape mental pain and psychic distress in my sleep, but that's no good this time. It hurts there, too.

Ruth's letter (question: how many Dear John letters have actually been sent to Johns? Should we form a club, like the Jim Smith Society?) came on the eleventh—it was waiting in my mailbox like a time-bomb when I got home. I scribbled my resignation on a memo form the next morning and sent it down to Roger Wade's office via Riddley, who is our janitor cum mailclerk at Zenith House. Roger came down to my office as if he had rockets on his heels. In spite of the pain I'm feeling and the daze I seem to be living in I was absurdly touched. After a short, intense conversation (to my shame I broke down and wept, and although I managed to refrain from telling him specifically what the problem was/is, I think he guessed) I agreed to defer my resignation, at least until that evening, when Roger suggested we get together and talk the situation over.

"A couple of drinks and a medium-rare steak may help to put the situation in perspective," was the way he put it, but I think it actually turned out to be more like a dozen drinks...each, maybe. I lost count. And it was to be Four Fathers again, naturally. At least a place for which I have no associations with Ruth.

After agreeing to Roger's dinner suggestion, I went home, slept for the rest of the day, and woke up feeling thick and dazed and headachey—that feeling of mild hangover I am left with whenever I get too much sleep I don't really need. It was 5:30, almost dark, and in the unlovely light of a late winter dusk I couldn't imagine why in God's name I had allowed Roger to talk me into the compromise measure of making my resignation provisional for even twelve hours. I felt like an ear of corn on which someone has performed a

fabulous magic trick. Taken the corn and the cob and left the green shield of leaves and the fine yellow-white poll of tassel intact.

I am aware—God knows I have read enough to be—of how ByronicKeatsian-Sorrows-of-Young-Werther that sounds, but one of the diary joys I discovered at eleven and may be rediscovering now is that you write with no audience—real or imagined—in mind. You can say whatever you fucking well want.

I took a very long shower, mostly just standing dazedly under the spray with a bar of soap in one hand, and then I dried off and dressed and sat in front of the TV until quarter of seven or so, when it was time to go off and meet Roger. I took Ruth's letter off my desk and stuffed it into my pocket just before I left, deciding that Roger ought to know just what had derailed me. Was I looking for sympathy? A tender ear, as the poet says? I don't know. But mostly I think I wanted him to be sure—really, really sure—that I wasn't just a rat deserting a sinking ship. Because I really like Roger, and I'm sorry for the jam he's in.

I could describe him—and if he were a character in one of my fictions I suppose I would do so lovingly, in too much detail—but since this diary is for me alone and I know perfectly well what Roger looks like, having trod the metaphoric grapes just down the hall from him for the last seventeen months, there is really no need to. I find that fact unaccountably liberating. The only salient points about Roger are that he is forty-five, looks eight to ten years older, smokes too much, is three-times divorced...and that I like him very much.

When we were settled at a table in the back of Fathers with drinks in front of us, he asked me what was wrong besides the obvious unfortunacies of this evil year. I took Ruth's letter out of my pocket and tossed it wordlessly across the table to him. While he read it I finished my drink and ordered another. When the waiter came with it Roger

finished his own drink at a gulp, ordered another, and laid Ruth's letter beside his plate. His eyes were still going over it.

"'Before long his tears were mingled with mine'?" he said in a low justtalking-to-myself voice. "'Each word has been like a lash across my heart'? Jesus, I wonder if she's ever considered writing bodice-rippers. There just might be something there."

"Cut it out, Roger. That isn't funny."

"No, I suppose not," he said, and looked at me with an expression of sympathy that was at the same time deeply comforting and deeply embarrassing. "I doubt if much of anything seems very funny to you now."

"Not even slightly," I agreed.

"I know how much you love her."

"You couldn't."

"Yeah, I could. It's on your face, John."

We drank without saying anything for a little while. The maitre d' came bearing menus and Roger waved him away with barely a look.

"I have been married three times and divorced three times," he said. "It didn't get better, or easier. It actually seemed to get worse, like bumping the same sore place time after time. The J. Geils Band was right. Love stinks." His new drink came and he sipped it. I half-expected him to say Women! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em!, but he didn't.

"Women," I said, beginning to feel like a figment of my own imagination. "Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

"Oh yes you can," he said, and although his eyes were on me he was quite clearly looking somewhere else. "You can live without 'em quite easily. But life without a woman, even if she's a shrew and a nag, sours a man. It turns an essential part of his soul into a pimple."

"Roger—"

He held up one hand. "You may not believe it, but we're almost done talking about this," he said. "We may get drunk and maudlin and run our gums on the subject, but we'll only be talking about how we've got a skinful, which is the only subject drunks ever talk about, really. I just want to tell you that I'm sincerely sorry Ruth has left you, and I am sorry for your pain. I'd share it if I could."

"Thanks, Roger," I said, my voice a little hoarse. For a second there were three or four Rogers sitting across the table from me and I had to wipe my eyes. "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome." He took a sip of his drink. "For the moment let us leave what I'm helpless to reverse or alleviate and talk about your future. John, I want you to stay with Zenith House, at least until June. Maybe until the end of the year, but at least until June."

"I can't," I said. "If I stayed I'd just be another millstone around your neck, and I think you've got enough of those already."

"I wouldn't be happy to see you go either time," he said as if he hadn't heard. He had taken the cigarette case he carried—it was too old and scratched and beaten to seem like an affectation—from his inside jacket pocket and was selecting a Kent from among what appeared to be several plump joints. "But I could let you go in June if we look like we're getting on our feet. If Enders swings the axe, I'd like you to stay on until the end of the year and help me wind things up in orderly fashion." He looked at me with something in his eyes that was very close to naked pleading. "Except for me, you're the only sane person at Zenith House. Oh, I guess none of them are as crazy as General Hecksler—although sometimes I wonder about Riddley—but it's only a matter of degree. I'm asking you not to leave me alone in this purgatory, and that's what Zenith House is this year."

"Roger, if I could—if I—"

"Have you made plans, then?"

"No...not exactly...but—"

"Not planning to go out and confront her, in spite of what this letter says?" He tapped it with a fingernail and then lighted his cigarette.

"No." The idea had certainly crossed my mind, but I didn't need Ruth to tell me it was a bad idea. In a movie the girl might suddenly realize her mistake when she saw the hero of her life standing before her, one hastily packed bag in his hand, shoulders drooping and his face tired from the transcontinental flight on the redeye, but in real life I would only turn her against me completely and forever or provoke some sort of extreme guilt reaction. And I might very well provoke an extreme pugilistic reaction in Mr. Toby Anderson, whose name I have already come to cordially hate. And although I have never seen him (the only thing she forgot to include, the jilted lover said bitterly, was a picture of my replacement), I keep picturing a young cleft-chinned man, very big, who looks, in my imagination at least, as if he belongs in a Los Angeles Rams uniform. I have no problem with landing in traction for my beloved—there is, in fact, a masochistic part of me which would probably welcome it—but I would be embarrassed, and I might cry. It disgusts me to admit it, but I cry rather easily.

Roger was watching me closely but not saying anything, merely twiddling the stem of his drink glass.

And there was something else, wasn't there? Or maybe it was really the only thing, and the others are just rationalizations. In the last couple of months I've gotten a big dose of craziness. Not just the occasional bag-lady who rails at you on the street or the drunks in bars who want to tell you all about the nifty new betting systems with which they mean to take Atlantic City by storm, but real sicko craziness. And being exposed to that is like standing in front of the open door of a furnace in which a lot of very smelly garbage is being burned.

Could I be driven into a rage at seeing them together, her new fella— he of the odious football-player name—maybe

stroking her ass with the blasé unconcern of acknowledged ownership? Me, John Kenton, graduate of Brown and president of the blah-blah-blah? Bespectacled John Kenton? Could I perhaps even be driven to some really irrevocable act—an act that might be more likely if he did in fact turn out to be as big as his odious name suggests? Shrieky old John Kenton, who mistook a bunch of special effects for genuine snuff photos?

The answer is, I don't know. But I know this: I awoke from a terrible dream last night, a dream in which I had just thrown battery acid into her face. That was what really scared me, scared me so badly I had to sleep the rest of the night with the light on.

Not his.

Hers.

Ruth's face.

"No," I said again, and then poured the rest of my drink over the dryness I heard in my voice. "No, I think that would be very unwise."

"Then you could stay on."

"Yes, but I couldn't work." I looked at him with some exasperation. My head was starting to buzz. It wasn't a very cheerful buzz, but all the same I signaled the waiter, who had been lurking nearby, for another. "Right now I'm having trouble remembering how to tie my own shoelaces." No. Wrong. That was hip and it sounded good, but it wasn't the truth—my shoelaces had nothing to do with it. "Roger, I'm depressed."

"Bereaved people shouldn't sell the house after the funeral," Roger said, and in my state of buzziness that seemed extremely witty—worthy of H. L. Mencken, in fact. I laughed.

Roger smiled, but I could tell he was serious. "It's true," he said. "One of the few interesting courses I ever took in college was called the Psychology of Human Stress—one of these nifty little blocks they give you to fill up the final eight

weeks of your senior year after you're done student teaching —"

"You were going to be a teacher?" I asked startled. I couldn't see Roger teaching—and then, all of a sudden I could.

"I did teach for six years," Roger said. "Four in high school and two in elementary. But that's beside the point. This course took up human stress situations like marriage, divorce, imprisonment, and bereavement. The course wasn't really a Signposts for Better Living sort of deal, but if you kept your eyes open you couldn't help but notice a few. One was this thing about living out at least the first six months of a really deep bereavement in the house where you and your loved one were living when the death occurred."

"Roger, this is not the same thing." I sipped my new drink, which ta s ted just like my old drink. It occurred to me that I was getting fried. It also occurred to me that I didn't care in the slightest.

"But it is," He said, leaning solemnly toward me. "In a queer way Ruth is dead to you now. You may see her from time to time over the years, but if the break is as final and complete as that letter sounds, the Ruth we could call your Lover-Ruth is dead to you. And you are grieving."

I opened my mouth to tell him he was full of shit, and then I closed it again because he was at least partly right. That's what carrying a torch really means, isn't it? You're grieving for the lover who died—the lover who is dead to you, anyway.

"People tend to think of 'grief ' and 'depression' as interchangeable terms," Roger said. His tone was a good deal more pedantic than usual, and his eyes were rimmed with red. It occurred to me that Roger was getting fried, too. "They're really not. There's an element of depression in grief, of course, but there are a whole slew of other feelings as well, ranging from guilt and sadness to anger and relief. A person who runs from the scene of those feelings is a person

in retreat from the inevitable. He arrives in a new place and discovers he feels exactly the same mixture of emotions we call grief—except now he feels homesickness as well, and a feeling of having lost the essential linkage which eventually turn grief into remembrance."

"You remember all of that from an eight-week psychology block course you took eighteen years ago?"

Roger sipped modestly at his drink. "Sure," he said. "I got an A."

"Bullshit you do."

"I also banged the grad student who taught the course. What a piece of ass she was."

"It's not my apartment I was planning to leave," I said, although I had no idea if I intended to leave it or not...and I know that wasn't his point anyway.

"It wouldn't matter whether you left that two-room cockroach condo or not," he said. "You know what I'm talking about here. Your job is your house."

"Yeah? Well the roof is sure leaking," I said, and even that seemed sort of witty to me. I was getting fried, all right.

"I want you to help me fix the leak, John," he said, leaning forward earnestly. "That's what I'm saying. That's why I asked you out tonight. And your agreement is the only thing capable of mitigating what is undoubtedly going to be one of the most beastly hangovers of my life. Help us both. Stay on."

"You'll pardon me if all of this sounds just a little bit self-serving and fortuitous."

He sat back. "I respect you," he said a trifle coldly, "but I also like you, John. If I didn't I wouldn't be breaking my ass to keep you on." He hesitated, seemed on the point of saying something more, then didn't. His eyes said it for him: And humiliating myself by damn' near begging.

"I just don't understand why you're trying so hard," I said. "I mean, I'm flattered, but—"

"Because if anyone can bring in a book or create an idea that will keep Zenith from going belly-up, it's you," he said. There was an intensity in his eyes I found almost frightening. "I know how fucking embarrassed you were by the whole Detweiller business, but—"

"Please," I said. "Let's not add insult to injury."

"I had no intention of even bringing it up," he said. "It's just that your very openness to such an off-the-wall proposition—"

"It was off the wall, all right—"

"Will you shut up and listen? Your response to the Detweiller query
showed you're still alive to a potentially commercial idea. Herb or Bill would simply have dropped his letter in the circular file."

"And we all would have been a lot better off," I said, but I saw where he was going and would be lying if I didn't say I was flattered...and that I felt a little better about the Detweiller affair for the first time since my humiliation at the police station.

"This time," he agreed. "But those guys also would have turned down V. C. Andrews with her Toys in the Attic series, or some brand new idea. Boom, into the circular file and then back to contemplating their navels." He paused. "I need you, Johnny, and I think it would be good if you stayed —for you, for me, for Zenith. There's no other way I can put it. Think it over and give me your answer. I'll accept it either way."

"You'd be paying me for the equivalent of cutting out paper dolls, Roger."

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

I thought about it. I'd started to clean out my desk that day and hadn't gotten very far—to paraphrase Poe, who would have thought the old desk could have had so much crap in it? Or maybe it was just me, and that crack about not even being able to tie my own shoelaces wasn't so wrong,

after all. I'd gotten two empty cardboard cartons from Riddley's room (which smells oddly green lately, like fresh marijuana—and no, I didn't see any) and did nothing but stare from one to the other. Maybe with a little more time I could at least complete the elementary job of cleaning up my old life before starting some unimaginable new one. It's just that I've felt so fucking d r e a r y.

"Suppose we table the resignation until the end of the month," I said. "would that ease your mind?"

He smiled. "It's not the best I'd hoped for," he said, "but it's not the worst I was afraid of, either. I'll take it. And now I think we better order while we can still sit up straight."

We ordered steaks, and ate them, but by then my mouth was too numb to taste much. I suppose I just ought to be grateful that no one had to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on either of us.

As we were leaving—holding onto each other, assisted by the anxious maitre d' (who no doubt only wanted to get us the fuck out of there before we broke something), Roger told me: "Something else I learned in that psychology course—"

"What did you say they called it? The Psychology of Damaged Souls?"

We were outside by then, and his cackles drifted away in little frosty plumes of vapor. "It was the Psychology of Human Stress, but I actually like yours better." Roger energetically flagged down a cab, whose driver would shortly be very sorry he picked us up. "It also said that it helps to keep a di a r y."

"Shit," I said. "I haven't kept a diary since I was eleven."

"Well what the hell," he said. "look for it, John. Maybe it's still around somewhere." And he went off into another wild run of cackles which only ended when he leaned over and puked nonchalantly on his own shoes.

He did it twice more on the way to his apartment building at 20th and Park Av e nue South, leaning as far out the window as he could (which wasn't too far since it was one of

those Plymouths where the rear windows will only roll down about halfway and there's a grim little yellow and black sign that says DO NOT FORCE THE WINDOW!) and just sort of blowing it into the slipstream and then settling back with that same nonchalant expression on his face. Our driver, a Nigerian or Somalian by his accent, was horrified. He pulled over to the curb and ordered us out. I was willing, but Roger sat tight.

"My friend," he said, "I would get out if I could walk. Since I cannot, you must convey us hence."

"I want you out my caib, good sah."

"So far I have done you the courtesy of vomiting out the window," Roger said with that same nonchalant and rather pleasant expression on his face. "It hasn't been easy because of the angle, but I have done it. I think in another few seconds I am going to vomit again. If you don't convey us hence, I am going to do it in your ashtray."

At Roger's building I assisted him into the lobby and saw him into the elevator with his apartment key in his hand. Then I wove my way back to the c a b .

"You git annoder cab, mon," the driver said. "You just pay me and git annoder. I don't want to no mo convey you hence."

"It's just down to Soho," I said, "and I'll give you a hell of a tip. Also, I don't feel like puking." This was a bit of a lie, I'm afraid.

He took me, and from the look of my wallet the next day I did indeed give him a hell of a tip. And I actually managed to make it upstairs before throwing up. Although once I started I didn't stop for quite awhile.

I didn't go in the next day—it was all I could do to get out of bed. My head felt monstrous, bloated. I called in around three and got Bill Gelb, who told me Roger hadn't shown, either.

Since then I have done a lot of crying and have had mostly sleepless nights, but perhaps Roger wasn't so wrong

—the only hours that I feel even halfway myself are the ones spent on the 9th floor at 490 Park. Riddley has just about had to sweep me out the door along with his red sawdust the last two nights. Maybe there is something to that old "he threw himself into his work" crap after all. Even this diary idea feels right...although it may only be the relief of finally being done with my dreadful pastoral novel.

Maybe I'll stay on after all. Onward and upward...if there is any upward left for me. Man, I still can't believe she's gone.

And I still haven't lost hope that she may change her mind.

March 21, 1981

Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton
Zenith House Publishers, Home of the Pus-Bags
490 Kaka Avenue South New York, New York 10017

Dear Poop-Shit,
Did you think I had forgotten you? My plans for revenge will go forward no matter WHAT! happens to me! You and all your fellow "*Pus-Bags*" will soon feel theWRATH! of CARLOS!!

I have covened the powers of Hell,

Carlos Detweiller

In Transit, U.S.A.

P S—Smell anything "*green*" yet, Mr. Poop-Shit Kenton?

From John Kenton's diary.

March 22, 1981

Had a letter from Carlos today. I laughed until I shrieked. Herb Porter came on the run, wanted to know if I was dying or what. I showed it to him. He read it and only frowned. He wanted to know what I was laughing about— didn't I take this Detweiller fellow seriously?
"Oh, I take him seriously...sort of," I said.
"Then why in hell are you laughing?"

"I guess I just must be a warped plank in the great floor of the universe," I said, and then went off into even madder gales of laughter.

Fr ow ning so deeply now that the lines in his face had become crevasses, Herb laid the letter on the corner of my desk and then backed into the doorway, as if whatever I had might be catching. "I don't know why you're so weird lately," he said, "but I'll give you some good advice anyway. Get yourself some personal protection. And if you need psychiatric help, John—"

I just kept laughing—by then I'd worked myself into a semi-hysterical frenzy. Herb stared at me a moment longer, then slammed the door and walked away. Just as well, really, as I finished by crying.

I expect to speak to Ruth tonight. By exercising all of my willpower I have managed to hold off on calling her, expecting each day that she must call me. Maddening

images of her and the odious Toby Anderson cavorting together—the locale which keeps recurring is a hot-tub. So I'll call her. So much for willpower.

If I had a return address for Carlos Detweiller I think I'd drop him a postcard: "Dear Carlos—I know all about covening the powers of Hell. Your Ob'd Servant, Poop-Shit Kenton."

Why I bother to write all this crud down, or why I keep plowing through the stacks of old unreturned manuscripts in the mailroom next to Riddley's janitorial closet, are both mysteries to me.

March 23, 1981

My call to Ruth was an utter disaster. Why I should be sitting here and writing about it when I don't even want to think about it defies reason. Perversity upon perversity. Actually, I do know—I have some dim idea that if I write it down it will lose some of its power over me...so let me by all means confess, but the less said, the better.

Have I written here that I cry very easily? I think so, but I haven't the heart to actually look back and see. Well, I cried. Maybe that says it all. Or maybe it doesn't. I guess it doesn't. I had spent the day—the last two or three days, actually—telling myself that I would not a .) c r y, or b.) beg her to come back. I ended up doi ng c .) both. I've had a lot of gruff locker room chats with myself over the last couple of days (and mostly sleepless nights) on the subject of Pride. As in, "Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his Pride." I would draw some lonely comfort from this thought and fantasize myself as Paul Newman—that scene in Cool Hand Luke where he sits in his cell after his mother's death,

playing his banjo and crying soundlessly. Heart-rending, but cool, definitely cool.

Well, my cool lasted just about four minutes after hearing her voice and having a sudden total remembrance of Ruth—something like an imagistic tattoo. What I'm saying is that I didn't know how gone she was until I heard her say "Hello? John?"—just those two words—and had this searing 360 degree memory of Ruth—God, how here she was when she was here!

Even after everything else is gone, a man's got his Pride? Samson might have had similar sentiments about his hair.

A n y w a y, I cried and I begged and after a little while she cried and in the end she had to hang up to get rid of me. Or maybe the odious Toby—I never heard him but am somehow sure he was in the room with her; I could almost smell his Brut cologne—picked the phone out of her hand and did her hanging up for her. So they could discuss his love-ring, or their June wedding, or perhaps so he could mingle his tears with hers. Bitter—bitter—I know. But I've discovered that even after Pride has gone, a man's got his Bitterness.

Did I discover anything else this evening? Yes, I think so. That it is over—genuinely and completely over. Will this stop me from calling her again and debasing myself even further (if that is possible)? I don't know. I hope so—God, I do. And there's always the possibility that she'll change her phone number. In fact, I think that's even a probability, given tonight's festivities.

So what is there for me now? Work, I guess—work, work, and more work. I'm tunneling my way steadily into the logjam of manuscripts in the mailroom—unsolicited scripts which were never returned, for one reason or another (after all, it says right in the boiler-plate that we accept no responsibility for such orphan children). I don't really expect to find the next Flowers in the Attic in there, or a budding John Saul or Rosemary Rogers, but if Roger was wrong about

that, he was sublimely right about something much more important—the work is keeping me sane.
Pride...then Bitterness...then Work.

Oh, fuck it. I'm going to go out, buy myself a bottle of bourbon, and get shitty-ass drunk. This is John Kenton, signing off and going for the long bomb.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

3/25/81

After what seems like ten weeks of unadulterated excitement—all of it the unhealthiest variety—things at Zenith House seem to have finally settled back into their accustomed drone. Porter sneaks into Jackson's office and sniffs the seat of her office chair during the five-minute period which comes every morning between ten and ten-thirty when the seat is vacant (it is during this half-hour each morning that Ms. Jackson removes herself and a copy of either Vogue or Better Homes and Gardens to the ladies' bog, where she has her daily dump); Gelb has resumed his surreptitious visits to the Riddley Walker Casino and after a rash double-or-nothing proposal earlier this week now owes me $192.50; Herb Porter, after his brief fugue, has once again mounted into the seat of the great political locomotive which he imagines only himself, of all the earth's billions, really capable of driving; and I have resumed these pages after a three-week hiatus in which I have peacefully swept dirt by day and spread narrative by night—and if that is not pomposity masquerading as eloquence, then nothing is.

But the accustomed drone is not quite the same as before, is it? There are two principal reasons for this. One is down the hall and one is right here in my little janitorial cubby...or perhaps it's only in my head. I would give a great deal to know which, and please believe me that my tongue is nowhere near my cheek when I say so. The change down the hall is, of course, John Kenton. The change in here (or in my head) is Zenith the Common Ivy.

Herb Porter doesn't realize that anything at all is wrong with Kenton. Bill Gelb has noticed but doesn't care. It was Sandra Jackson who asked me yesterday if I had any idea why John had suddenly decided to go through every old manuscript in that corner of the mailroom I think of as The Isle of Forgotten Novels.

"No ma'am!" I said. "I sho don't!"

"Well, I wish he'd stop," she said. She popped open her compact, peered into it, and began to poke at her hair with an afro comb. "I can't even go in there anymore without sneezing until I'm just about blue. Everything's covered with dust and all that dry creepy stuff that comes out when those cheap padded mailers tear open. You must hate it in there."

"It sho is pow'ful dusty, Miz Jackson, and that's a fack!"

"Is he mailing them back?"

"I doan' know if he is nor not."

"Well, you take care of the mail, don't you?" she asked, putting away her compact and producing a tube of lipstick. A twist of her fingers produced something the size an shape of a child's penis and

the color of a hunter's cap. She began to apply this in great shiny plates. I caught a whiff and immediately understood why Porter sniffs her seat instead of her face.

"Yes ma'am, I sho do!"

"So if you haven't seen any of them going out, they aren't going out. Just as well. If he was sending them out I would have to complain to Roger and perhaps even send a memo on the subject to Mr. Enders." She gave her lipstick a twist, recapped it, dropped it into the maw of the huge shapeless trunk she calls her purse, and preened for a moment. "None of them were accompanied by return postage. That's why they're there. It's not our business to send them back—most of them or all of them—but he is doing it at his own expense, and it is thus none of La Jackson's business.

"I wish he'd stop it, even if he's dumping them down the incinerator," she said, now producing a plastic canister which, when opened, dis closed dusting powder and a rather discolored puff. Sandra Jackson then proceeded to disappear into a choking pink cloud that had much the same effect on me as the one she claimed Kenton's office produced on her. "He's making the rest of us look bad and there's no goddamned need of it," she finished from inside the cloud.

"No ma'am," I said, and sneezed.

"Are you growing marijuana in here, Riddley?" she asked. "It smells funny in here."

"No ma'am, I sho ain't!"

"Uh," she said, and put away the puff. She began to unbutton her blouse just as I'd begun to hope I was going to escape. She doffed it, revealing two small decorous white-lady breasts like uncooked muffins with a cherry poked into each one. She began to unzip her skirt and then paused in the act, giving me another moment of fleeting hope. "What else is wrong with him, Riddley?"

"Ah sho don't know, Miz Jackson," I said, but I know, all right, and Roger Wade knows as well—I think it's almost incredible that Wade somehow persuaded such a total romantic to stay on, but somehow he did. Porter doesn't know, Gelb doesn't care, and Jackson's too self-centered to see what's right in front of her slightly saggy little white-lady tits: his girl told him that he just dropped off the Top Forty of her life. And Kenton has responded (with a little help from Roger Wade, one must assume) in a way that seems both honorable and courageous to me—a way I like to think I myself would respond: he's working his fucking ass off.

Her skirt puddled around her feet and she stepped out of it.

"Want to play truckdriver and hitchhiker today, Riddley?" she asked.

"I sho do, Miz Jackson!" I said as her hands went to my belt-buckle and tugged it undone. At moments like this I have about four fantasies to fall back on that never fail. One, I regret to say, is of having my sister Deidre first diaper me and then accommodate me after I have made weewee in my

didy. Ah, sex is the great comedy, all right. No doubt about that.

"Oh Mr. Truck-Driver, it is so big and hard!" Jackson exclaimed in a squeaky little-girl voice as she grasped me. And, thanks to Deidre and the diapers, it was.

"That there is my Hearst shifter, little Miz Hitchhikuh!" I growled, "and right now I'se gwine th'ow it into overdrive!"

"At least ten minutes, Mr. Truck-Driver," she said, lying down. "I want at lest three and you know it takes me..." She sighed contentedly as I sank my drive-shaft into her universal joint. "...awhile to get up to cruising speed."

Just before leaving (she had given her hair a few more good pokes with the afro comb before dropping it into her purse on top of her panties) she looked around sharply and asked me again if I wasn't perhaps growing a little cannabis in here.

"No ma'am!" I said—I knew perfectly well by then that it was Zenith she was smelling, just as I know that Zenith the Common Ivy smells like no ivy I ever came in contact with in my life.

"Because if you are," she said, "I want my share."

"But Miz Jackson! I done already tole you—"

"I know. But just remember, if you are, I want my share." And she left. As things turned out she got four instead of three, and with any luck she'll be proof for a week or two before popping back to play Truck-Driver and Hitchhiker or Virgin and Chauffeur or possibly the Teensy White Editor and the Big

Black Janitor, which is what all these games boil down to in the end.

But never mind; we have come to the other thing around here which has not lapsed back into dozy familiarity, and that is the ivy-plant sent by Kenton's nemesis. It raises a question in my mind which I have never successfully answered for myself—perhaps because for a long time my life and my ambitions have rendered it unimportant. It is, I mean, a question I haven't thought about as seriously or so constantly or with such a clear interest that I have a personal stake in the answer since I was—oh, eleven or so, I reckon. The question is just this: Is there an invisible world or not? Are supernatural events possible in a world where everything seems either perfectly explained or perfectly explicable? Everything, that is, except for the Shroud of Turin...

...and, perhaps, Zenith, the Common Ivy.

I find myself thinking again and again about the feelings of deep foreboding that seemed to fall over me when I touched the box it—

No; no, that isn't right. For whatever it's worth, that is most definitely not right. The bad feelings I had about that box—dread, revulsion, a well-nigh ungovernable feeling of having stepped over a clearly marked border and onto taboo ground—did not come from outside. The chill I felt did not fall over me or smother me or steal up my spine on cold little cat's feet. That feeling came from inside, rising up like a spring rises out of the earth, a cold little circle in which you may glimpse your face, or the

face of the moon. Or even better, it came the way Faulkner says the dark comes, not falling out of the sky but rising inexorably up out of the ground. Only in this case I believe the ground (Floyd would scoff) happens to be my own soul.

Never mind, though—pass it. Never mind feelings, vapors, megrims...or "subjective phenomena," if you want to be polite.

Let us look at some rather more empiric data.

First: After looking at the Ivy entries in both Grolier's and Collier's Encyclopedias, plus the photos in Floyd's college botany book, I am prepared to say that Zenith does not look like any of the ivies pictured there. I mean, it looks like them in the same way that Fords look like Bugattis— they are both gasoline-powered vehicles with four rubber tires— but that's as close as it comes.

Second: Although the little sign poked into the soil of Zenith's pot identified him as "Common Ivy," there is apparently no such thing. There is poison ivy, and Virginia Creeper, and Ground Ivy, and Boston Ivy, and Japanese Ivy; there is also English Ivy, and I suppose that might be called Common Ivy by some people, but Zenith looks more like a cross between Japanese Ivy and poison ivy than it does English Ivy. Sending Kenton a poison ivy plant sounds like something that would tickle the bejabbers out of a fellow like Carlos Detweiller, but I have handled it, felt its leaves and vines, and have no rash. Nor am I immune. I had some killer cases of poison ivy when Floyd and I were kids.

Third: As Jackson said, it smells like cannibis sativa. I dropped into a florist's on my way home tonight and smelled a Boston Ivy and a hybrid called a Marion Ivy. Neither smelled like pot. I asked the proprietor if he knew of any ivies that smelled like marijuana and he said no—he said the only plant he knew of which smelled much like growing cannibis is called dark columbine.

Fourth: It is growing at a speed which I find just a bit frightening. I've carefully gone over my few references to the plant in this journal—and believe me when I say that if I had known how much it was going to prey on my mind there would have been more—and have noted the following: on February 23rd, when it arrived, I believed it would most probably die; on the 4th of this month I noted a healthier appearance, an improved smell, four open leaves and two more unfurling, plus a single tendril which reached to the edge of the pot. Now there are almost two dozen leaves, broad and dark green and oily looking. The tendril which had reached the lip of the pot has now attached itself to the wall and runs nearly six inches up toward the ceiling. It would look almost like an FM radio antenna except for the tightened curls of the new leaves along its length. Other tendrils have begun to crawl along the shelf where I put the plant, and they are attaching themselves in the best ivy tradition. I pulled one of these tendrils loose (had to stand on my overturned mop-bucket to get to Zenith's level) and it came...but with surprising reluctance. The tendrils have stuck themselves to the wooden shelf with

surprising tightness. I could hear the minute ripping sound the tendril I chose made when it parted company from the wood, and I did not much care for the sound. It left little marks in the paint. It has, near the pot, produced a single dark blue flower—not very pretty or remarkable. It is of the sort, I believe, produced by the type of ivy commonly called gill-over-the-ground. But...all of this in three weeks?

I have an unpleasant feeling about this plant. It's as much in the way I so easily and unconsciously refer to it as "him," I think, as in its extraordinary growth-spurt. I think I want to have a botanist look at it. Floyd will know one. There's one other thing but I don't even want to write it down. I th

(later)

That was my Aunt Olympia, calling from Babylon, Alabama. My mother is dead. It was very sudden, she said through her tears. A heart attack. During her nap. No pain, she said through her tears. How does anyone know. Oh bullshit, my mother. I loved her. Aunt O. said she's been trying Floyd but no one answers, oh I did love her my sweet fat uncomplaining mother who saw so much more than she said and knew so much more than she let on. Oh I did love her and love her.

Movement now is best. Floyd first then arrangements; family; burial. Oh mama I love you.

I've had whiskey. Two big gulps. Now I'll write it. That plant. Zenith. Zenith the Common Ivy. Can't be an ivy. Fucking thing's carnivorous. I saw two leaves that were open three days ago rolled up today. So I unrolled them. This is when I was standing on the

mop-bucket, looking at it. Dead fly inside of one. What I think was a mostly decomposed baby spider inside the other. No time now. I'll deal with it another time.

Christ I wish I'd said goodbye to my mamma. Does anyone ever get a chance to say goodbye?

From *The New York Post,* page 1, March 27, 1981:

MAD GENERAL DIES IN MORTUARY HORROR!

(Special to the *Post*) The mingled ashes of a man and a woman were recovered from the floor outside the crematorium of the Shady Rest (L.I.) Mortuary yesterday afternoon, and the ashes and bones of a second man, believed to be Major General Anthony R. Hecksler (Ret.), who escaped from Oak Cove Asylum in upstate New York twenty-three days ago, were discovered inside the crematorium furnace itself.

The other two dead were Mr. And Mrs. Hubert D. Leekstodder, owners of the Shady Rest.

Sources close to the investigation told the *Post* yesterday that Hecksler had had business dealings with Mr. And Mrs. Leekstodder some years ago, and that they were on his "grudge-list." A police official who asked not to be identified said that the madman left a note behind identifying the Leekstodders as "foremen of the antichrist" and "real allaround losers."

The note was found pinned to the earlobe of a corpse in the Mortuary's composing room.

"Losers or not, they are real crispy now," said Police Lieutenant Rodney Marksland of the Long Island Police Department.

According to the *Post's* police source, details of what is now believed to be a suicide and double murder are extremely grisly. "We think he killed the Leekstodders first and then stuffed the bodies into the crematorium, mostly

because it is just too horrible to believe he could have stuffed them in there while they were still alive," the source said. "But there's not much doubt about what he did then—raked out their ashes, turned on the gas, crawled in himself—although the temperature must have still be very high—and just flicked his Bic. Poof! 3,000 degrees of spot heat. The jets were still flaming when the heat alarms went off in the house across the street and the Leekstodders' daughter-in-law came to see what was going on."

It was not a Bic lighter that the mad General actually flicked, but a platinum-plated Zippo with the Army Emblem on it and engraved TO TONY FROM DOUG/AUG. 7th, 1945. The "Doug" referred to is believed to be Hecksler's close friend General Douglas MacArthur.

"It was Iron-Guts, all right," the *Post's* source claimed, adding that in addition to the lighter, searchers found a number of items amid the bone-dotted clumps of ashes in the death oven that have been positively identified as belonging to Hecksler. Although he declined to name all of these items, our exclusive source revealed to the *Post* that two of them were gold teeth implanted following the end of World War II. Hecksler was briefly captured by the Germans during an intelligence operation in November of 1944, and two of his teeth were pulled during his interrogation. It was the replacements for those two teeth which investigators found in the crematorium furnace, according to the *Post's* source.

Related stories: New Yorkers Breathe Sigh of Relief (4); Colorful career of Iron-Guts Hecksler Recalled (Centerfold).

F R O M T H E D I S P A T C H E S O F I R O N - G U T S H E C K S L E R

[Editor's note:These dispatches were written in a number of blank S & H Green Stamp books
which the General apparently carried on his person at all times.]

Mar 29 81
1990 hrs
Location Classified

Operation Hot Foot completed successfully. Two more foremen of the Antichrist successfully dispatched back to the hell they came from. Also one bum. Sorry I had to give up the lighter. Hurt self plenty, but okay. Can take pain. Always could. HA!! Newspapers say I'm dead. Burn uniform. Behind enemy lines. Shot if caught. Been there before, HA!! Going gets tough. Tough get going. Never punt on 4th down. Must infiltrate city. Designated Jew undoubtedly lulled by reports of my death. Guard down. Will commence Operation Bookworm coming weekend. April Fool to the Designated Jew, HA!! Have had a dream. Someone named CARLOS is looking for me. Means me harm? Yes I think so. CARLOS=spic name. Spics damned good fighters. Crafty. City full of mongoloid-polyglot ruffians. Worse than ever. Air full of brain-killing transmissions. Was there a terrorist named CARLOS? Doesn't matter. Zenith House my objective. Infiltrate on weekend. Kill Designated Jew. Kill whole staff if poss. Kill CARLOS if CARLOS does indeed exist. All foremen of the Antichrist. I will be able to think about Antichrist & other things better after I get some suppositories.

A memo from HAR L

DAT E : 3/30/81
TO: Roger Wade, Editor in Chief, Zenith House SUBJECT: Three Books!! The Principle of Gravity!!

Rog!
Listen, babes, I took a meeting last Fri with Teddy Graustark, the Apex veep in charge of Print Media. Main topic was mags: *Hot Tools, Raw Cycle, Third World Mercenary, Your Pregnancy,* and *Horny Babes.* We're dropping all of them except for *Third World Mercenary* and Y*our Pregnancy.* Subj of Zenith House also came up. I bought you a little more time, babes, but forget the year I promised you (which would be down to nine months now anyway, want a sub to Y*our Pregnancy*?—joke). Graustark will give you until June 30th to come up with three (3) books you *guaren-goddamn-tee* will hit *The New York Times* Bestseller List. If you can do this, I think your job might be safe until summer of 1982. If they actually *become* bestsellers, it'll be safe until the middle of the decade or even longer. Fail to do this, and the Zenith operation goes the way of *Hot Tools* and *Raw Cycle* by the end of October.

You may be pissed about this, Roger-babes, but Graustark hit me with his version of the Law of Gravity which struck me as TRUE TRUE TRUE!: *SHIT ROLLS DOWNHILL!* That's it in a nutshell. And altho sad, it's true. This particular ball o' shit started with the Number One Apex Big Chief & Head Honcho, Sherwyn Redbone, then rolled down to me. I am now rolling it down to you, Rog, and I assume you will roll it on down to your editorial staff, who just might be able to

stop it before it gets all the way down to the bottom of the hill. If they *can't* stop it, your cozy little home at bottom of said hill is going to be buried beneath a huge & smelly ball of shit.

To recapitulate (that's not the one that means surrender, is it?), here is your mission, should you choose to accept it (joke). Three (3) books which you *guaran-goddamn-tee* to be bestsellers, delivered by June 30th. All three must hit the *Times* list *this year,* which means you better get them in production as soon as possible.

Sorry about the rush-rush, babes, but to quote The Chairman of the Board (Frank Sinatra, not Mr. Redbone), "That's life, that's how it goes."

Yours,

Harl Enders Comptroller, Apex

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John Kenton, Herb Porter, Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson
DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: Okay, fearless editorial staff, the balloon has gone up. You will want to read the attached Harlow Enders masterpiece for yourselves, but the challenge we have been given is clear: to put three paperbacks on the Ti*mes* list, where no Zenith House product has ever gone before, on or before December 31st. This is absurd, of course—like challenging someone to climb Mount Everest in Bermuda shorts and tennis shoes—but that changes nothing. Editorial meeting later today, as always, but for now I'd like it in writing: do *any* of you have a book you consider to be bestseller material? I want memos by noon.

Memos, please, not calls. From now until the end, I want transcriptions of everything we do. If nothing else, I might want a large wad of paper to stuff up somebody's ass.

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb RE: Possible Bestseller???

You're kidding, of course. This is lunacy. I have a new Mort Yeager (he wrote it in the prison library—Attica) and it's publishable after we take out the bestiality (halfway through the book, I'm not shitting you on this, the villain has sex with his housecat), but that's about it. We also did succeed in getting rights to novelize *Lesbo Dracula* (see pictorial in this month's ish of *Horny Babes)*, but now there seems to be some question if it will be released anywhere except the porno houses. Otherwise, the cupboard is bare.
B.G.

P.S. This memo from Enders is a joke, isn't it? A cruel joke.

P.P.S. When does Riddley get back from Alabama?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: Herb Porter
RE: Possible Bestseller

The idea of this place producing one bestseller, let alone three, is ludicrous. Having said that, I have a wacky idea, and you can shoot it down if you want, but here goes. Let's get Olive Barker—still our best ghost writer, in my estimation—to write a quickie bio of Iron-Guts Hecksler, concentrating on his final rampage. Now that the guy is dead, we've got the whole tale— beginning, middle, fiery climax. I could even kick in a chapter about what went on here, maybe juice it up a little. What do you think?

Herb

P.S. I think you should hunt Enders down and kill him just for calling you "babes." Bad news is bad enough. The man is patronizing.

P.P.S. Has anyone heard from our mailroom and janitorial staff? Riddley, in other words. Went by his cubby today. Something in there smells really good. Sort of like hot toast and jam.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger Wade
FROM: SANDRA JACKSON
RE: Totally silly request

Roger (or should I call you "Babes"?),

Zenith House has never published a bestseller and never WILL publish a bestseller. But I DO have a rather nutty idea. It has to do with Anthony L.K. LaScorbia, our Nasty Creatures from Hell writer. People have apparently been sending Tony *jokes. F*or example: "What do you call 5 million marching Brazilian fire-ants?" Answer: Lunchtime in Rio. Or: "How many babies does it take to satisfy a pack of rampaging scorpions?" Answer: How many have you got? These may not strike you funny, but I laughed my butt off, and several people I've told them to have also laughed (some against their will, from the look on their faces). Why not let him loose on this? It can't hurt. He wants to call it J*okes from Hell*. He insists it's a new kind of joke, he calls it the "Sick Joke."

What do you think?
Sandi

P.S. When does Riddley get back? My wastebasket is absolutely *overflowing*! I peeped my head in his cubby today, and do you know what? It smells *good.* Sort of the way my grandmother's kitchen used to smell when she was baking cookies. Maybe I'm losing it.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Insane request
RE: Responses from Bill, Herb, and Sandra

Herb said it best, babes—the idea is ludicrous. Nevertheless, I keep working my way through the old manuscripts. Nothing even close so far, and I'm down to the last two shelves. If nothing else, we can all go on unemployment knowing that the mailroom is clean for the next company that moves in.

Having said that, let me tell you that I feel depressed (more than usual, that is) to realize I must count myself, along with Bill, among the goats instead of the sheep. I mean, Herb and Sandra at least came up with ideas, didn't they? Which leads me to the real purpose of this memo. You're the boss, not me, but I actually think both ideas have merit. A book about the General would sell, especially if we really hustled it out there. I know that we don't have the ability to produce an "instant book" like the ones which followed the release of the Watergate tapes, but Olive could work fast, especially if Herb worked on it with her. I'm sure he'd give himself a starring role, but even that might work.

The joke-book idea is more nebulous, but I have to tell you that when I read that, I felt some obscure circuit (probably one I should feel ashamed of) go hot. Possibly we could widen the scope, i.e. sick jokes on every subject? And stick a funny name on the author, something like Ima Sicko

or I.B. Ill? I know how it sounds—in a word, sub-juvenile—and yet it seems to me something might be there.

My first reaction was I wish I'd thought of that. A sick joke in itself. Clearly we have reached the bottom of the barrel, but I think you should give it a shot. Meanwhile, I'll continue with the last of the unreturned scripts. I'm in too deep to back out now.

John

P.S. A book of jokes would be an even faster turn than a factoid book on old Iron-Guts. Like a week. All we have to do is put our heads together and come up with the most scabrous jokes we can remember. Q. What do you call a kid with no arms and legs? A. Second base.

P.P.S. I really was president of the Literary Society at Brown, although all that seems like a dream to me now. In fact, this whole year seems like a dream.

P.P.S.S. Why is everyone so worried about Riddley? What's this about good smells coming from his closet? The last time I was down there in smelled like mold and Lysol. I might have to check this out. Also, I'm tempted to tell Sandra I know exactly where she can put her wastebasket. I'd be glad to help with the insertion procedure, too.

P.P.S.S.S. When does Riddley get back? I sho does miss dat man! Yassuh!

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Herb DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The book about Hecksler is green-lit. Tentative title: *The Devil's General*. Talk to Olive Barker at once. You're authorized to offer her $2,500 plus expenses up to $150 a week for four weeks. If we're going out, we might as well go out spending Apex's money just as hard and fast as we can. We'll want photos for a middle-of-thebook section. You'll be working on her every step of the way, Herb. Tell her she's off downers for the duration.

Uppers are fine.

Roger

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Sandra

DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: The joke book is green-lit, but forget LaScorbia; let him concentrate on his wasps and flies. The five of us are going to write this scabrous little tome ourselves. Tentative title: W*orld's Sickest Jokes*. We'll have our first editorial session on this project this afternoon, at Flaherty's Pub down the street. This is the closest thing we've got to a winner, so let's take it seriously. We need to think about whether or not we want (or dare) to go ethnic, as in "How many Poles does it take" and "How many Mexicans does it take." My feeling is if we're going to go sewer-diving, we might as well go all the way to the bottom. And don't you or anyone else talk to me about sharing royalties on a book of jokes about dead babies and sodomy. We're saving our jobs here, or trying to.

Perhaps we should invite Riddley into our little brain-trust. He'll be back next week, and I hope you'll pass that along to your colleagues. We're dying here, and all anyone seems to care about is the goddamned janitor.

Roger

P.S. Also, stay out of his closet. I think he keeps his personal stuff in there.

P.P.S. Unless you want to wash some windows or wax some floors, of course. In that case, be my guest.

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Riddley Walker's possible contribution to insane and degrading jokebook

By all means let's get him in on the project when he gets back. Maybe he can contribute a few dead-mommy jokes.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb DATE: 3/30/81

MESSAGE: As someone who hasn't even come up with a *dim* idea for a book of *any* kind, I suggest you keep your wisecracks to yourself. Or maybe go down to R.W.'s closet and sniff the air. It seems to have done wonders for Herb and Sandra. That is not a serious suggestion. As I told Sandra, the janitor's closet is strictly Riddley's domain.

From John Kenton's diary

March 30, 1981

I staggered into my apartment tonight half-drunk from the weirdest brainstorming session of my life (place, Flaherty's Pub; subject, what do you call a leper in a hot tub, etc., etc.). I'm drinking far too much lately, yet I would be a flat liar if I didn't say I felt a weird, shameful excitement. Nor is it just booze driving my emotions—at least I don't think so. I don't know if a jokebook can possibly hit The New York Times bestseller list—probably not—and yet I think we all felt that sense of something actually happening. Before we were done, half the people in the pub were contributing jokes, my favorite being the above-referenced about what you call a leper in a hot tub (Stu, of course). If it's any consolation, Sandra and Bill both finished up drunker than me, Roger perhaps a shade less so. Herb Porter doesn't drink. I believe he's got a problem with it, and goes to those meetings where you introduce yourself by your first name.

Weird, weird meeting. But not as weird as the letter I found waiting for me in my mailbox when I finally swam home. I'm too headachey to write much more tonight, all I want is to eat something non-contentious and go to bed, but I will clip Ms. Barfield's letter to this page of my diary, and take it in to the office tomorrow. Perhaps by then the nagging chill I feel running up my back will be gone.

Roger will know what to do. At least I hope so. And perhaps he'll know something else as well: how a woman who runs a flower shop and greenhouse in Central Falls,

Rhode Island could have known my address. My home address.

And Kevin.

How in God's name could she had known about Kevin? Not just Kevin, either. Kevin Anthony, she writes.

Kevin Anthony, 7/7/67.

She also says she doesn't like Carlos Detweiller—that she's afraid of him—and there's that much to be grateful for, but I find I'm not much comforted.

After all, she could be lying.

Fuck this, I'm going to bed. With luck, they'll all stay out of my dreams. Ruth Tanaka most of all. Something odd: at one point during our time in Flaherty's, I went into the bathroom. While I was standing at the urinal, Ruth's name popped into my mind. Her name but not her face. For a couple of seconds there I couldn't see her face at all. What came instead was the last of the "sakrifice photos." Carlos Detweiller, his face in the shadows, holding up a dripping heart.

Christ.

letter to john kenton from ms. tin a b arfield

Mar 28 '81 Dear Mr John Kenton,

You don't know me from Eve the First Mother but I know you. Also we have Carlos in common and you know exactly who I mean. I am Tina Barfield the prop of the Central Falls House of Flowers. You think you are thru with Carlos but Carlos is not thru with you. You are in danger. I am in danger. Everyone at the publishing house where you work is in danger. But also you have great opportunity. The Dark Powers must give before they can take. There are things I can tell you. Come and see me as soon as you get this letter. As soon as you get it. My time here must end soon. Some of the Tongues have begun to wag.

Do you think I am crazy. Answer is yes you do. But I can help you find the one you're looking for. It has been in that room all the time. Why do I do this. Partly because my soul, although mortgaged to the Goat, may still be redeemable. Mostly because I fear & loathe Carlos Detweiller. Hate that son of a bitch! Would do anything to see his plans brought to Wrack and Ruin. Believe me when I say reports of his death will be greatly exaggerated. Like the General.

Come Tuesday if you can. Bring the Water-Boy if you want. You can do
more than sidestep Carlos's revenge, Mr. John Kenton. With my help you can use him to achieve your dream. If you doubt me think of this: Kevin Anthony 7/7/67. I am sorry if this upsets you but there's no time to spend convincing you that I know what I know.
Sincerely yours,

Tina Barfield

From John Kenton's diary

March 31, 1981

This has been a long day—a terrible day—a wonderful day—an I-don'tknow-what day. All I know for sure is that I'm shaken to my heels. To my very soul. You can blithely quote Hamlet—"more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—and never think about what the words mean. And then maybe shit happens, like the kind of shit that happened to Roger and me today. And the floor you have so confidently spent your life walking on suddenly turns transparent and you realize there's a horrible gulf below it. And the worst thing is the gulf isn't empty. There are things in it. I don't know what those things are, but I have an idea they're hungry. I'd like to be out of this. And yet there is something to what Roger says. I feel some of the crazy excitement I saw in his eyes. I—

Oh man, this is no good. I'm all over the map. Time to take a deep breath, settle down, and start from the beginning. I'll get this down even if it takes me all night. I have an idea that I wouldn't be able to sleep much, anyway. And do you know what haunts me? What keeps going through my head like some kind of crazy mantra? The Dark Powers must give before they can take. The possibilities in such a simple statement! If such a simple statement could ever be true!

Okay. From the beginning.

Usually it takes the alarm five minutes of uninterrupted braying to get me up, but this morning my eyes popped

open all on their own at 6:58 AM, two minutes before I'd set it to go off. My head was clear, my stomach settled, not so much as a trace of a hangover, but when I got up I left my own dark silhouette behind me on the sheet; I must have sweat out a pint of mingled booze and salt water in the night. I had ugly, tangled dreams; in one of them I was chasing Ruth with some sort of poisonous plant, yelling after her that if she ate the leaves, she'd live forever.

"You know you want to, you bitch!" I was yelling at her. "Smell the leaves! Like cookies in your grandma's kitchen! How can something that smells like that be bad for you?"

I grabbed a quick shower, a few mouthfuls of juice right from the carton, and then out the door I went. Roger always gets in early, but this morning I meant to beat him.

On the bus I read through the Barfield woman's letter again. Last night, fuzzy with drink and about two thousand jokes concerning lesbians, black people, and deaf nuns, all I could see was my dead brother's name. In the flat gray light of an overcast New York morning, sitting amidst the last wave of blue-collars and the first wave of white- and pink-collars—strangely serene in that uneasy mixture of Posts and Wall Street Journals—I read the letter again, this time better able to appreciate its multi-layered weirdness. Yet it was my brother's name my eyes kept returning to.

I stepped off the elevator and onto the fifth floor of 409 Park Avenue South at 7:50 AM, sure I must have beaten Roger by at least half an hour…but the lights in his office were already on, and I could hear his IBM clacking away. He was transcribing jokes, it turned out. And although his eyes were a trifle bloodshot, he didn't look any more hungover than I felt. Looking at him sitting there, I felt a kind of dull hate for Harlow Enders and all the suits above him, guys who—I'd bet on it—have never read a single one of the books they publish. Their idea of a page-turner is a profit-heavy annual report.

"They don't deserve you," I said.

He looked up, startled, then smiled. "You're here early. But I'm glad. I've got something to show you, John."

"I've got something to show you, too."

"All right." He pushed back from the typewriter, then looked at it with distaste. "The book about General Hecksler is going to be unpleasant, but the joke-book…man, this stuff is ugly." He looked at his current copy and read: "'How many starving Biafarans can you get in an elevator car?'"

"All of them," I said. Now that we were out of the smoke and laughter and yelled drink orders and the blaring juke that combine to make Flaherty's Flaherty's, the joke really wasn't funny at all. It was sad and ugly and dangerous. The fact that people would laugh at it was the worst thing about it.

"All of them," he agreed softly. "Fucking all of them."

"We don't have to do the book," I said. "There's no paper on it yet except for a couple of memos, and those could disappear."

"If we don't do it, someone else will," Roger said. "It's an idea whose time has come. It is, in its own stinky way, brilliant. You know that?"

I nodded.

"You want to know something else? I think it is going to be a bestseller. And I think the dozen or so sequels we'll do are going to be bestsellers. I think that for the next two years, jokes about niggers, kikes, blindmen, and dying minorities are going to have a…a vogue." His mouth gave a revolted downward twitch…and then he laughed. It was horrible, that laugh. Outraged and yet greedy. Then I heard myself laughing, too, and that was even more horrible.

"What did you want to show me, John?"

"This." I handed him the letter. His eyes went to the signature first, then widened. He looked up at me and I nodded. "Carlos's boss in Central Falls. Maybe we're not through with him after all."

"How did she get your address?"

"I have no idea."

"Do you think she could have gotten it from Detweiller?"

"She says she hates him."

"Doesn't mean she does. Who's Kevin Anthony? Any idea?"

"Kevin Anthony was my brother. When he was ten, he started losing the sight in one eye. It was a tumor. They took the eye, but the cancer had already gotten into his brain. He was dead within six months. My mother and father never got over it."

The color left Roger's face. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"No, you didn't. No one in New York does, so far as I know. Let alone Central Falls. I hadn't even gotten around to telling Ruth."

"And the date? Was that—"

I nodded. "The day he died, right. Of course none of this is top secret. The woman could have found out. Mediums wow their marks by knowing stuff they're not supposed to know, and in the end it turns out to have been nothing but research and legwork. But—"

"You don't believe it. I don't, either." Roger tapped the letter. "'Bring the Water-Boy if you want to.'"

"I wondered about that," I said.

"When I was in high school, I went out for the football team. I was serious about it, fool that I was. I only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds, but I had visions of…I don't know…being the Reading High School version of Knute Rockne, I suppose. I was serious, but no one else was. They just about killed themselves laughing. The team, the cheerleaders, the whole student body. Coach along with the rest of them. I ended up being the team waterboy. It became my nickname. It's even in the yearbook. Roger Wade, Class of '68, Drama Club, Glee Club, Newspaper. Ambition, to write the Great American Novel. Nickname, Waterboy."

For a moment neither of us said nothing. Then he picked up the letter again. "She seems to imply that Iron-Guts Hecksler is still alive. Do you think that's possible?"

"I don't see how he could be." But I did see, at least sort of. It had been a fire, after all. Nothing left but ashes and a few teeth. It could have been done. It suggested a degree of cunning I didn't much like to think of, but yes—it could have been done.

"She wants us in Central Falls," Roger said, turning off his typewriter and standing up. "Let's give her what she wants. Still plenty of time to shag ass over to Penn Station and catch The Pilgrim. We can be in Rhode Island by noon."

"What about the joke book? What about The Devil's General?"

"Let those three deadbeats do a little work for a change," Roger said, cocking his thumb at the short corridor which opens on the editors' cubicles.

"You're serious?"

"As a heart attack."

And he was. At 9:40 we were stepping onto Amtrak's Pilgrim in the bowels of Penn Station, armed with magazines and bagels; at 12:15 we were stepping off in Central Falls; at one o'clock we were getting out of a taxi on Alden Street, in front of the Central Falls House of Flowers. The place is a rather shabby New England saltbox rising behind a dead lawn still dotted with clumps of melting snow. To the rear is an absolutely huge greenhouse which does indeed stretch all the way to the next street. Outside of the Botanical Gardens in D.C., it's the biggest damned greenhouse I've ever seen. But unlike the Botanical in D.C., this one is filthy—the windows are grimy, some mended with tape. We could see little shimmers of heat rising off the top—the apex, if you'll pardon the word. During the weird Mardi Gras of the original Detweiller craziness, someone referred to it as a jungle—I don't remember who, probably one of the cops—and today Roger and I could see why. It wasn't just the heat rising off the glass panels and into the gray March chill; mostly it was the dark bulk of the plants behind those panels. In the dull light they looked black rather than green.

"My uncle would go bonkers," Roger said. "If he was still alive, that is. Uncle Ray. When I was a kid, he'd always greet me with 'Hey, I'm Uncle Ray from Green Bay.' To which it was my job to reply, 'Hey, Ray, what do you say?' And he'd come back with 'Can ya stay, or do ya have to leave today?'"

I suffered this rather bizarre reminiscence in silence. The fact was, I couldn't take my eyes from the dark, crowding bulk of all those plants.

"Anyway, he was an amateur horticulturist, and he had a greenhouse. A little one. Nothing like this. Come on, John."

I thought, being in a rhyming mood, he might add a verbal flip of the hip like Let's get it on, but he just resumed walking up the path. The porch steps were stained with a winter's worth of salt. Beyond them, in a window by the door, was an FTD placard, the one with winged Mercury on it, and a sign reading COME IN, WE'RE OPEN! The words were flanked with roses.

When we reached the steps I stopped for a second. "I just remembered—you said you had something to show me, too. Back at the office. But you never did."

"Just as well. I believe it may be better shown when we get back."

"Does it have anything to do with Riddley's room?" I don't know where that came from, exactly, but once it was out I knew I was right.

"Why, yes. It does." He looked at me closely. Standing there at the foot of the steps with the collar of his overcoat turned up, framing his face, and a little color in his cheeks, it occurred to me that Roger Wade's a pretty good-looking guy. Better-looking now, probably, than a lot of the fellows who made fun of him back in high school, calling him Waterboy and God knows what else. Roger might even know that, if he's been back to any of his class reunions…but those voices from high school never quite leave our heads, do they? Maybe if you make enough money and bed enough

women (I wouldn't know about those things, being both poor and shy), but I doubt if they leave even then.

"John," he said.

"What?"

"We're delaying."

And because I knew it was true—neither of us wanted to go into Carlos Detweiller's erstwhile place of employment—I said, "Delay no more" and lead the way up the steps.

A little bell jingled over the door when we went in. The next thing to hit me was the smell of flowers…but not just flowers. The thought that crossed my mind was Funeral parlor. Funeral parlor in the deep south, during a heat wave. And although I've never been in the deep south during a heat wave—have never been in the deep south at all—I knew that was about right. Because there was another smell under the heavy perfume of roses and orchids and carnations and God knows what else. It was meaty smell, bordering on rancid. Unpleasant. Roger's mouth twitched downward at the corners. He smelled it, too.

Probably back in the forties and fifties, when the place had been a private home, the room we stepped into had been two rooms: the entry and the small front parlor. At some point a wall had been knocked down, making a large retail area with a counter running across it about three-quarters of the way in. There was a pass-through panel in the counter, now raised, and beyond it an open door leading into the greenhouse. It was from there that the worst of the smell was coming. The room was very hot. Behind the counter was a glassed-in coldbox (I don't know if you call that kind of thing a refrigerator or not—I suppose you must). There were bouquets of cut flowers and floral arrangements in there, but the glass was so fogged up—from the temperature difference between the two environments, I suppose—that you could barely tell the lilies from the chrysanthemums. It was like looking through a heavy English mist (and no, I've never been there, either).

To the left behind the counter, sitting under a blackboard on which various prices had been marked, was a man with the Providence Journal held open in front of his face. We could just see a few wisps of white hair floating like milkweed over an otherwise bald skull. Of Ms. Tina Barfield there was no sign.

"Hello!" Roger said heartily.

No response from the man with the paper. He just sat there with the headline showing—REAGAN WILL PULL THROUGH, DOCTORS VOW.

"Hello? Sir?"

No movement. A queer idea came to me then: that he wasn't really a man but a mannequin posed with the newspaper upraised. To foil shoplifters, perhaps. Not that shoplifters would frequent flower shops in any great numbers, I wouldn't think.

"Pardon?" Roger said, speaking even louder. "We're here to see Ms. Barfield?"

No response. The paper didn't so much as rattle.

Feeling a little like a creature in a dream (although I hadn't completely parted with reality yet—that part I'll be coming to shortly), I stepped forward to the counter, where there was a bell beside a card reading PLEASE RING FOR SERVICE. I banged it smartly with my palm, producing a single sharp ding! I had a crazy urge to call "Front, please!" in my best snootyNew-York-desk-clerk voice, and suppressed it.

Slowly, very slowly, the paper came down. When it did, I wished it had stayed up. The descending Journal disclosed a face I had seen before, in the "Sacrifice Photos." There it had been distorted with pain, horror, and incredulity. Now the face of Norville Keen, author of such pearls as "Why describe a guest when you can see that guest," was utterly blank.

No. That's not right.

Shit—

(later)

I've been sitting here in front of this lousy little Olivetti for almost five minutes, trying to think of what le mot juste might be, and the best I can do is slack. The man's face not just being devoid of expression, you understand, but seemingly devoid of muscle tension as well. It had probably always been a long face, but now it seemed absurdly long, almost like a face glimpsed in one of those trick carnival mirrors. It hung off his skull like dough hanging from the lip of a mixing bowl.

Beside me, I heard Roger draw his breath in. He told me later that at first he thought we were looking at a case of Alzheimer's, but I believe that was a lie. We are modern men, Roger and I, a couple of lapsed Christians in the big city who go through our days under the rule of law and the assumption of…how shall I put this? Of empirical reality. We don't believe that reality to be benign, but we don't find it actually malignant, either. Yet we have our secret hearts, of course, and these are closely attuned to the organs of our brute instinct. Those adrenal-fed organs slumber most of the time, but they're there. Ours awoke in the office of the Central Falls House of Flowers and told us the same thing: that the man looking at us from those dusty black expressionless eyes was no longer alive. That he was, in fact, a corpse.

(later)

I haven't had any dinner and don't want any—perhaps appetite will come back when I've finished this. I did go around the corner just now for a double espresso, however, and it's perked me up. Put a little heart back in me. And yet—tell the truth, shame the devil—I found myself more or less scuttling from streetlight to streetlight, not liking the dark, feeling watched. Not by any one person (certainly I didn't sense Carlos Detweiller lurking, perhaps with a pair of nice, sharp pruning shears at the ready) but by the dark itself. Those organs of instinct I mentioned are now fully awake, you see, and above all things they don't like the dark. But

now I'm back in my cozy kitchen, under plenty of bright fluorescent light, with half a cup of hot, strong coffee by my right hand and things are better.

Because, you know, there is a good side to all this. You'll see.

All right, where was I? Ah yes, I know. The lowered newspaper and the blank stare. The slack stare.

At first neither Roger nor I could say anything. The man—Mr. Keen— didn't seem to mind; he just sat on his stool by the cash register and stared at us with the newspaper crumpled in his lap instead of in front of his face. The pages he was open to appeared to be a double-spread ad from a car dealership. I could see the words REFUSE TO BE UNDERSOLD.

Finally I managed, "Are you Mr. Keen? Mr. Norville Keen?"

Nothing. Just those staring eyes. To me they looked as dusty as stones in a dry ditch.

"You live in Carlos's building, right?" I asked. "Carlos Detweiller?"

Nothing.

Roger leaned forward and spoke very slowly and clearly, like someone addressing a man he believes to be deaf, mentally retarded, or both.

"We're…looking…for…Tina…Barfield…Is…she…here?"

At first there was nothing in response to this, either. I was about to try my luck (all the time thinking somewhere in the bottom of my mind that it was no good trying to get information from the dead, people had been trying that for years without success), when, very slowly, Mr. Keen raised his hand. He was wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, and the muscles on his upper arm hung lax, sort of dangling off the bone. He pointed one long, yellow finger, and I thought of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, pointing relentlessly at Ebeneezer Scrooge's forgotten grave. It wasn't a grave Mr. Keen was pointing at, but the open door to the greenhouse.

"In there, is she?" Roger asked in an insanely hearty tone of voice; it was as if we'd all shared a mildly funny joke. Q. How many dead men does it take to run a greenhouse? A. Just Norv.

No response from Mr. Keen. Except for the pointing finger, that is. It's impossible to convey how uncanny he was. I have asked myself again and again if he was breathing, and I just don't know. It's the pointing finger I remember best—the nail at the end of it was jagged and splintered, as if he had gnawed it. And his eyes. The dusty, expressionless stones of his eyes.

"Come on," Roger said, and started for the raised pass-through.

I began, "Do you really think that's a good…" but Roger obviously thought it was a good idea, because he kept on walking. Or maybe he'd just decided it was the only idea. And, not wanting to be left under Mr. Keen's unblinking gaze, I followed him.

I hurried through the gap in the counter with my head slightly lowered, and as a result I ran right into Roger's back and almost knocked him over. Something had stopped him cold about ten feet into the greenhouse, and when I raised my own head to look, I saw what it was.

And here, I find, John Kenton's powers of description are totally inadequate to the task of reporting what we were looking at in that damned place. I got A's in all my comp courses, I've published a good many sensitive stories in a good number of sensitive "little magazines" (none lately, however, as editing the Macho Man and Windhover series of books seems to have blunted my own writing appetite considerably), and at Brown I was considered to be a leading contender for one of America's literary lion spots in the final years of the twentieth century (not least of all by yours truly). One can go on feeling that until one is tested. Today I was tested, and tonight I am found wanting (most of all by yours truly). Yet I think that if a Mailer or a Roth or a Bellow

had been with us this afternoon when we stepped into the greenhouse which runs between Alden Steet and Isle Avenue (where it abuts on a high board fence covered with NO TRESPASSING signs), any of them would have found himself similarly daunted by the task of describing what lay on the other side of that door. Perhaps only a poet—a Wallace Stevens or a T.S. Eliot—would have really been up to the task. But since they're not here, I'll have to do my best.

The strongest sensation was of having stepped over the border into another world, a nightmarish ecosystem of gigantic ferns, prehistoric trees, and lush alien greenery. I'm not telling you that I didn't recognize any of the plants, because I did. Bordering the central aisle, for instance, crowding it so that walking in anything other than single-file would have been almost impossible, were what I took to be common ferns, although grown to uncommon size and height (Roger confirmed this, saying that they were overgrown Boston and maidenhair ferns, for the most part). Besides fringing the aisle at whose head we stood, their questing offshoots—rhizomes, if I remember the word Roger used—went snaking across the cracked and filthy orange tiles like hair-tufted tentacles of some sort.

Beyond them on both sides, towering in some cases all the way to the dirty glass panels at the peak of the greenhouse roof, were palm trees, banana trees (in some cases complete with tiny bunches of hanging green bananas that looked like insect cocoons), and great shouting bursts of rhododendron, mostly green but every here and there blooming out in convoluted clots of azalea. These huge clumps of growth were somehow frightening in their vitality; their packed greenery seemed to threaten, promising to awaken every winter-dormant allergy in your head and your sinuses…before enveloping you and crushing you to death, that was. And it was hot. It might have been only eighty or so in the office, but out here it was ninety or maybe even a hundred. Steamy, too, the air oozing with humidity.

"Whoa," Roger said in a tiny, almost breathless voice. He took off his overcoat with the slow motions of a sleepwalker, and I imitated him. "Good Christ, Johnny. Good Christ almighty." He began to walk down the aisle, brushing the overhanging branches of the great ferns with his coat, which he'd draped over his arm, and looking around with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"Roger, maybe that's not such a good idea," I said. "Maybe we should just—" But he wasn't paying any attention, so I hurried after him.

About thirty feet in, a new aisle crossed the one we'd started on. As if to add the final surreal touch, there was a street-sign planted in the dirt on our side of the intersection. An arrow pointing straight ahead was marked HERE. The ones pointing both ways along the crossing aisle were marked THERE and YONDER. It would have been nice to believe that someone had a sense of humor, perhaps inspired by Lewis Carroll, but I did not, indeed, believe that. The signs seemed somehow deadly serious. (Although I freely admit that this might have been just my perception—I wasn't in a state of mind to appreciate wit.)

I caught up to Roger and again suggested we should go back. He again seemed not to hear me. "This is unreal," he said. "Johnny, this is absolutely unreal."

I couldn't decide if I liked being called Johnny or not—it's a nickname I haven't heard much since junior high. As for the unreal quality of Ms. Barfield's greenhouse, that seemed to me to require no remark. It was evident—not just before us, but now all around us. I'd already sweat through my shirt, and my heartbeat was booming in my own ears like a drum.

"Heliotrope there," he said, pointing. "Hibiscus growing next to it and behind it. Absolutely flourishing, the whole works. Can you smell the 'biscus?"

I was getting hibiscus, all right, plus a dozen other floral and/or herbaceous scents, some as soft as dusk in Polynesia,

some sharp and bitter. A squat hemlock and a large yew tree were growing catty-corner from where we stood, seeming to reach for us with their stiff branches. But beneath all the mingled odors was that other one, that meaty mortuary smell.

Heatwave down south, I thought. First the train-wreck, then the power failure. Now there are forty bodies down there, mangled and beginning to stink. Even with all the flowers. Some of the corpses with their eyes open, dusty and blank, like stones in a dry ditch—

"Roger—"

I looked back from the tangle of yew and hemlock (I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to grow such trees in a greenhouse, but there they were) and Roger was gone. I was alone.

Then I saw just a swirl of his overcoat down to my right, along the aisle marked THERE. I started to hurry after him, then stopped, reached into my pocket, and brought out a crumple of paper. It was, in fact, my copy of Harlow Enders's memo, the one with the maniacal demand that we pull three New York Times bestsellers either out of thin air or from our own asses, whichever happened to be the more productive. I tore a piece from the bottom of it, crumpled it up, and tossed it into the center of the intersection of HERE, THERE, and YONDER. I watched it bounce to a stop on the dirty tiles, then hurried after Roger. I felt absurdly like Hansel forsaken by Gretel.

On THERE Street, the ferns and the Boston ivy crowded even closer; the leaves made an unpleasant whispering sound as they brushed the cloth of my increasingly damp shirt. Up ahead I saw another swirl of overcoat, and one of Roger's shoes before he turned again, this time to the left.

"Roger!" I bawled. "Will you for God's sake wait for me?"

I tore another piece of paper from the Enders memo, dropped it, and trotted along the new path in Roger's wake. Here the way was flanked not by ferns but by overgrown

cacti, bright green at their bases, fading to an unpleasant yellow shade at their tops, branching out in crooked arms, all of them armored with thick needles that ended in nasty blunt tips. Like the branches of the ferns, these seemed to reach into the path. Brushing the cactus arms wouldn't just produce a nasty low whispering sound, though; if you brushed these, blood would flow. If they grew any closer, a person couldn't get through, I thought, and then it occurred to me that if Roger and I tried to return this way, we'd find the aisle barred. This place was a maze. A trap. And it was alive.

I realized I could hear more than just the beating of my heart. There was also a low, muted smacking sound, like someone without much in the way of manners sucking at soup. Only this sounded like a lot of someones.

Then another idea occurred to me: that wasn't Roger up ahead at all. Roger had been snatched into the jungle, and I was following someone who had stolen his topcoat and one of his loafers. I was being lured in, lured to the center, where some gigantic, flesh-eating plant awaited me, a venus flytrap, a pitcher-plant, perhaps some species of homicidal vine.

But I came to the next corner (a sign marked this three-way intersection as OVER, BACK, and BEYOND) and Roger was standing there, coat now sagging from one hand, shirt plastered to his back in a dark tree-shape. I almost expected to see him standing on the bank of a jungle river, a sluggish tributary of the Amazon or the Orinoco running smack-dab through the middle of Central Falls, Rhode Island. There was no river, but the smells were denser and spicier, and that undersmell of spoiled flesh was even stronger. The combination was bitter enough to make my nose sting and my eyes water.

"Don't move to your right," Roger said, speaking almost absently. "Poison sumac, poison oak, and poison ivy. All growing together."

I looked and saw a massed bank of shiny leaves, most green, some a baleful scarlet, all seeming to almost drip their poisonous oils. Touch that shit and you'd scratch for a year, I thought.

"Johnny."

"We need to get out of here," I said. Then added: "If we can find our way, that is."

Why had we come in here to begin with? Why, when the fellow who had pointed our way had been so obviously dead? I had no idea. We must have been bewitched.

Certainly Roger Wade seemed bewitched. He spoke my name again— "Johnny"—as if I hadn't said anything.

"What?" I asked, looking mistrustfully at the shining mass of mingled poison oak, sumac, and ivy. That slobbery smacking sound was a good deal closer now. The man-eating plant, no doubt, anxious for its meal. New York Editors tartare, how yummy.

"These're all poison," he said in that same dreamy voice. "Poison or hallucinogenic or both. That's datura, there, common name jimson weed—" Pointing to a nasty snarl of green growing from what looked like a pool of stagnant water. "—and darlingtonia…joe-pye weed…there's nicotiana and nightshade…foxglove…euphorbia, the dangerous version of poinsettia… Christ, I think that one's a night-blooming cereus." He was pointing to a huge plant with its blooms tightly folded in against the dim gray light. Roger turned to me. "And stuff I don't know. Lots of it."

"You recognize the anthurium, of course," said an amused voice from behind us.

We wheeled around and there stood a small woman with a mannish face and a stocky body beneath short, graying hair. She was wearing a gray suede beret and smoking a cigarette. She didn't look hot at all.

"That one's not dangerous, although of course the leaves of the rhubarb might interfere with your digestion—

permanently, I wouldn't be surprised—and the pods of the wisteria are also quite nasty. Which of you is John Kenton?"

"I am," I said. "And you're Ms. Barfield."

"Miss," she said. "I don't buy that politically correct shit. I never did. You fellows shouldn't be out here on your own."

"I know that," I said dismally.

I might have said something else, but before I could, Tina Barfield did an amazing thing. She raised one foot, shod in a sensible black shoe, snuffed her cigarette, and held it out to her side, where a branch heavy with pods of some sort overhung the path (I could no longer think of it as an aisle, even though it was floored with the cracked remains of orange tile; we were in the jungle, and when you're there it's paths you follow, not aisles…if, that is, you're lucky enough to find one). One of the pods split open, becoming a small, greedy mouth. It ate the still-smoldering cigarette butt out of her hand and then sealed itself shut again.

"Good God," Roger said hoarsely.

"It's a kind of catchfly," the woman said indifferently. "Silly bugger will eat anything. You'd think it would choke, but nope. Now that you're here, let me show you something."

She brushed past us and strode on down the path, not even looking back to make sure we were following…which we were. She turned left, right, then right again. All the while those arrhythmic smacking sounds grew stronger. I noticed that she was dressed in a cranberry-colored pant suit, every bit as sensible as her shoes. She was dressed, I thought, like a woman who has places to go and things to do.

I can remember now how scared I was, but only in a vague fashion. How sure I was that we'd never get out of that horrible steamy place. Then she turned a final corner and stopped. We joined her.

"Holy…shit," I whispered.

Ahead of us, the path ended. Or perhaps it had been overgrown. The plants blocking the way were a filthy grayish black, and from their branches flowers sprouted —I think they were flowers—the pinkish-red of infected wounds. They were long, like lilies on the verge of blooming, and they were opening and closing slowly, making those smacking sounds. Only now that we were upon them, it no longer sounded like smacking. It sounded like talking.

There comes a point where the mind either breaks or shuts itself down. I know that now. I was all at once filled with a species of surreal calm I've never felt before. On one level I knew that I was there, looking at those hideous, slow-talking blossoms. But on another, I rejected that completely. I was at home. In my bed. Had to be. I'd overslept the alarm, that was all. I wasn't going to beat Roger to the office as I'd wanted to, but that was okay. More than okay. Because when I finally did wake up, all of this would be gone.

"What in God's name are they?" Roger asked.

Tina Barfield looked at me with her eyebrows raised. It was the expression of a teacher calling on a student who should know the answer.

"They're the Tongues," I said. "Remember the letter? She said some of the Tongues had begun to wag."

"Good for you," the woman said. "You're maybe not as stupid as you acted when Carlos first got in touch with you."

For a moment no one said anything. The three of us simply looked at those blossoms opening and closing, their scarlet interiors winking. The soft, toothless whispering sound made me feel like clapping my hands over my ears. It was almost words, you see. Almost real talk.

Ah, fuck. Scratch that. It was real talk.

"Tongues?" Roger asked at last.

"They're widow's tongue," Tina Barfield replied. "Known in some European countries as witch's tongue or crone bane. Do you know what they're talking about, Mr. Kenton?"

"About us," I said. "Can we get out of here? I'm feeling sort of faint."

"Actually, I am too," Roger said.

"Leaving would be wise." She swept her arm around, as if to encompass that whole world of dank plants and powerful smells. "This is a thin place, always has been. Now it's thinner than ever. Quite dangerous, in fact. But you needed to see it in order to understand. The Dark Powers have been loosed. The fact that it was a brainless asshole like Carlos who loosed them makes no difference. He'll pay, of course. Meanwhile, it's unwise to tempt certain forces too far. Come on, boys."

I didn't like being called her boy, but I was willing enough to follow her, believe me. She lead us back quickly and with no hesitation. Once I clearly saw an earth-clotted root come snaking out of the foliage at the left side of THERE Street and slither around her shoe. She gave her foot an impatient jerk, snapping the root without even looking down. And all the time we could hear that low, whispering, smacking sound behind us. Tongues, wagging.

I looked down for the crumpled balls of paper I'd dropped, but they were gone. Something had grabbed them just as the root had grabbed Tina Barfield's shoe and whisked my markers away into the undergrowth.

I wasn't surprised. At that point if John F. Kennedy had come strolling out of the bushes arm-in-arm with Adolf Hitler, I don't think I would have been surprised.

My espresso's gone. I promised myself I'd stay away from the booze tonight, but I've got a bottle of Scotch out in the kitchen and I need a little, after all. Right now. For medicinal purposes. If it does nothing else, perhaps it'll stop the shaking in my hands. I'd like to finish this before midnight.

(later)

There. Given the restorative powers of Dewers, I will finish by midnight. And there's no prolixity here, believe me. I'm writing as fast as I can, sticking to what feels like the

absolute essentials…and writing it down feels oddly good, like recapturing some emotion you thought was gone forever. I'm still reeling from the events of the day, and there is a sense of having been torn free of a thousand things I always took for granted—a whole way of thinking and perceiving—but there's also an undeniable exhilaration. If nothing else, there's this to be grateful for: the thought of Ruth Tanaka has hardly crossed my mind. Tonight when I think of Ruth, she seems very small, like a person glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. That, I find, is a relief.

We were back in the office area in no time at all, following closely on Tina Barfield's heels. It felt warm in the office area after coming in from outside, but after returning from the greenhouse the office felt positively frigid. Roger slipped back into his overcoat, and I did the same.

The old man was sitting exactly where he had been, only with the paper once more raised in front of his face. Barfield lead us past him (I crabbed by in a kind of sideways scuttle, remembering that horror movie where the hand suddenly shoots out the grave and grabs one of the teenagers) and into a smaller office.

This room contained a desk, one metal folding chair, and a bulletin board. The top of the desk was empty except for a jar-top with a couple of mashed-out cigarette butts in it and an IN/OUT basket with nothing in either tray. The bulletin board was empty except for a little cluster of thumbtacks in the lower corner. There were a few picture-hooks spotted around, each located in a vaguely brighter square of cream-colored wallpaper. Sitting by the door were three smart suitcases of the same cranberry shade as the woman's suit, but I hardly needed to look at them to know that Tina Barfield was not long for the House of Flowers…or Central Falls, for the mater. I guess there's just something about old "Poop-Shit" Kenton that makes people want to put on their boogie shoes and get out of town. This is a trend that began with Ruth, now that I think of it.

Barfield sat down in the chair beside the desk and rummaged in the pocket of her jacket for her cigarettes. "I'd ask you boys to sit down," she said, "but as you can see, seating accommos are limited." As she tapped a cigarette out of the pack, she looked critically at Roger. "You look like shit, Mr…I didn't catch your name."

"Roger Wade. I feel like shit."

"Not really going to pass out, are you?"

"I don't think so. Could I have one of your cigarettes?"

She considered it, then held the pack out. Roger took one with a hand that was far from steady. She offered the pack to me. I started to decline it, then took one. I smoked like a chimney in college—it seemed to be the thing to do if you were creative, like growing your hair long and wearing jeans—but not since then. This seemed to be a good time to start again. As H.P. Lovecraft's Necronomicon might put it, When Tongues wag, behold, the lapsed smoker will return to his evil ways; even unto three packs a day will he return. And while I'm on this subject, I might as well confess that double espresso wasn't all I got at the little Korean deli around the corner; I scored a pack of Camels, as well. The unfiltered ones. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, go directly to Lung Cancer.

Carlos's former boss eased a book of matches from under the cigarettepack cellophane, struck one, then lit John's cigarette and my own. That done, she shook the match out, dropped it in the jar-top, scratched another, and lit her own cigarette.

"Never three on a match," she said. "Bad luck. Especially when you're travelling. When you're travelling, boys, you need all the luck you can get."

I took a deep drag, expecting my head to swim. It didn't. I didn't even cough. It was as if I had never been away. That may say everything that needs to be said about my state of mind and emotion.

"Where are you going?" Roger asked her.

She looked at him coolly. "You don't need to know that, my friend. What you do need to know I can tell you in five minutes or so. Which is good." She glanced at her watch. "It's quarter past one right now—"

Startled, I looked at my own watch. She was right. Only an hour since we'd stepped off The Pilgrim. A lot had happened since then. We were older and wiser men. Also more frightened men.

"—and I told the cab company to have someone here promptly at onethirty. When that horn blows, boys, the conference is over."

"You're a witch, aren't you?" I said. "You're a witch, Carlos is a warlock, and there really is some sort of coven at work in Central Falls. This is like..." But the only thing I could think of was Rosemary's Baby, and that sounded stupid.

She waved her hand impatiently, leaving a trail of blue-gray smoke behind. "We're not going to waste our time bandying words, are we? That'd be primo stupid. If you want to call me a witch, fine, yeah, I'm a witch. And if you want to call a bunch of people who mostly got together to use the Ouija board and eat deviled ham sandwiches a coven, be my guest. But don't make the mistake of calling Carlos a warlock. Carlos is an idiot. But he's a dangerous idiot. A powerful idiot. Luckily for you boys, he's also a kind of golden goose. Or could be. Carlos is like some of the stuff out there in the greenhouse. Foxglove, for instance. You eat it in the woods, it can stop your heart like a cheap pocket-watch. But if you process it and inject it—"

"Presto, digitalis," Roger said.

"Give that boy the kewpie-doll," she said, nodding. "I don't have time to give you fellas a complete history of the Dark Arts and Powers, and wouldn't even if I did have time. Except for geeks and dweebs, it's as boring as anything else. Besides, you wouldn't believe the half of it."

"After what we saw in there, I'd believe anything," Roger muttered.

She puffed her cigarette, flared her nostrils, and blew out twin jets of smoke. "Bolsheveky! People always say stuff like that, but it ain't true. Ain't true a minute. Take it from me, big boy, you wouldn't believe the half of it. But you believe enough right now, maybe, to pay attention to what I'm telling you. Which is why I brought you here, okay?"

She mashed her cigarette out in the jar-top and peered at us through the rising smoke.

"Lesson one, chilluns: whatever Carlos told you, take it as the literal truth. He's too dumb to lie. Whatever you saw in those pictures he sent you, take that as the literal truth, too. As for the plant he sent…use it! Why the fuck not? You should have something out of this, if only for the inconvenience he's caused you. Use it, be careful of it, and don't let it get grow too far. Ouija says SAFE—I asked—so you're okay for now. There'll be bloodshed, that's unavoidable, but unless they have help, the dark forces can only take their own. As long as your new houseplant doesn't get any innocent blood, everything is jake…in the short run, at least. Ouija says SAFE. Of course if you play tag around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut. Just a fact of life. Point is this: when you've got what you need, give that plant a nice DDT shower. Don't be greedy. Adios ivy. Adios Carlos."

"There is no plant," I said. "I mean, he wrote me a letter promising to send one, but he used a rather pitiful alias which I saw through at once. I sent Riddley, he's our mail-room guy, a memo telling him to dump it down the incinerator, if it came. So far as I know, it never did."

"It came," Roger said quietly.

"It did? When? It must have been after Riddley left for his mother's fu—"

"Nope," Roger said. "It came before. Riddley's got it set up in its own little pot, which it has almost entirely outgrown. Damn thing's growing like a weed." He glanced at Tina Barfield. "If you'll pardon the term."

"Why not? It is a weed. A rather special form of ivy imported from… well, from another place. Let's leave it at that, boys, what do you say?"

"In the interest of speedy discourse, I guess Buttwheat say otay," Roger replied, and I gave a hearty, surprised guffaw of laughter. A moment or two later, Tina Barfield joined in. It didn't make us friends, good God no, but it eased the atmosphere a little bit. Restored a sense of rationality, no matter how false that sense might have been.

Roger turned to me, looking slightly apologetic. "That was what I was going to show you this morning," he said. "The plant in Riddley's cubicle. I got curious about Herb and Sandra's memos…the good smells they reported coming from in there…and I walked down to take a look. I—"

"Maybe you boys could catch up on all that stuff going back to New York on the Metropolitan," Barfield said. "I'm sure it will make the miles just fly by. Myself, I could care less. And tempus continues to fugit. Anyone want to freebase a little more nicotine?"

We both took a cigarette; so did she. There followed the ritual of the two matches.

"How'd you know we're going back on the train?" I asked her. "OUIJA?"

"I read those Windhover books," she said, apparently apropos nothing. "Romance is okay, but what I really like is the rough sex." She surveyed us with gleaming eyes, perhaps trying to decide if either of us might be capable of rough sex. "Anyway, I don't need the Ouija board to know a couple of guys working for the company that publishes those probably wouldn't be flying."

"Thanks a pantload, sweetheart," Roger said. He didn't sound amused; he sounded genuinely angry.

"What I want to know," I said, "is why you're giving us all this help."

"Good point," Roger said. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts and all that. If anything, you should be pissed at us. After

all…" He looked around the bare office. "…it looks like all of this has kind of changed your lifestyle."

"Yep," she agreed, and showed two rows of tiny but sharp-looking teeth in a smile. "Let me out of jail, that's what you did. What I'm trying to do is to thank you. Also to try and make myself safe from Carlos. Whose obituary you'll soon be reading, by the way. I'm surprised he's not dead already. He's stepped out of the protective circle. There are things out there—" She jabbed her cigarette toward the greenhouse… also, I suspect, to some horrible place beyond it. "—and they're all hungry. When Carlos sent you those pictures, and his idiotic manuscript, and finally the plant, he opened himself up to those things. But dead or alive, he can still get me. Unless, that is, I do a genuine Good Turn." I clearly heard the capital letters in her voice. So did Roger; I asked him later. "Which I'm trying to do."

She glanced at her watch again.

"Listen to me, boys, and don't ask questions. Carlos's power came to him from his mother, who wasn't an idiot… except in her blind love for her son, which finally got her killed. Since 1977, when that happened, the group here—the coven, if you like, although we never called ourselves that—has been in Carlos Detweiller's power. There's a story by a man named Jerome Bixby called 'It's a Good Life.' Read it. The situation in that story was our situation. Carlos killed his mother—by accident, I'm almost sure, but he killed her, all right. He killed Don, my husband, and that was no accident. Neither was what happened to Herb Hagstrom. Herb was supposedly Carlos's best friend, but he crossed him and there was a car accident. Herb was decapitated."

Roger winced. I could feel my face doing the same thing.

"The rest of us survived by kowtowing to Carlos…going along with his so-called sacred seances, although they were more and more dangerous…and we survived. But survival isn't the same thing as living, boys. Never was, never will be."

"The old fellow out there doesn't look like he's even surviving," Roger said. "Norville," she agreed. "Carlos's last victim. Sounds like something out of the books you publish, don't it? He had the living heart torn right out of his chest, and do you know why? Do you know what his biggest sin against Carlos was? Norv had a little wine one night—this was around the turn of the year—and beat Carlos three times running at Crazy Eights. Carlos likes to win at Crazy Eights. He…took offense."

"Mr. Keen's really dead," I murmured. I mean, I knew he was, I think I knew it from the instant he lowered his newspaper and looked at us with those awful dusty eyes, but rationality dies hard. At least in the daytime. Now, after five hours at this Olivetti, I find I have no trouble believing it at all. When the sun comes up again that may change, but as for now I have no trouble whatsoever believing it.

"He's undead," she corrected. "He's a zombie. What's keeping him at least partly alive is my psychic force. When I'm gone, he'll fall over. Not that he'll know or care, God bless him."

"And the plants in the greenhouse?" Roger asked. "What about them?"

"Rhode Island Electric will eventually turn off the electricity for nonpayment. When the lights go, the heat goes. Everything out there will die, and good riddance. I'm tired of selling magic mushrooms to a bunch of bikers and aging hippes, anyway. Fuck them and the pink horses they ride in on."

From outside came the long blat of a horn. Tina Barfield got up immediately, briskly butting the remains of her cigarette in the jar-top.

"I'm off!" she said. "The wide open spaces await. Just call me Buckaroo Banzai."

"You can't go yet!" Roger said. "We have questions—"

"Yeah-yeah-right-right," she said. "If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, does it make any

noise? If God made the world, who made God? Did John Kennedy really fuck Marilyn Monroe? Help me with my bags and maybe you'll get a few more answers."

I took one and Roger took two. Tina Barfield opened the door and swept out into the office. Norville Keen, the Undead Florist of Central Falls, had lowered his newspaper again and was staring straight ahead. No, his chest wasn't moving. Not at all. Looking at him hurt my mind in some deep place that has never been hurt before today, at least that I can remember.

"Norv," she said, and when he didn't look at her she said something short and gutteral. Uhlahg! is what it sounded like. Whatever it was, it worked. He stared around. "Open your shirt, Norv."

"No," Roger said uneasily. "That's okay, we don't need to—"

"I think you do," she said. "Going back on the train, your normal way of thinking is going to reassert itself and you'll start doubting everything I just told you. This, though… this'll stick to your ribs." Then, even more sharply: "Uhlahg!"

Mr. Keen unbuttoned his shirt, slowly but steadily. He pulled it open, exposing his gray tideless chest. Running down the center of it was a horrifying bloodless wound like a long vertical mouth. In it we could see the gray and bony bar of his sternum.

Roger turned away, one hand raised to his mouth. From behind it came a dry coughing sound. As for me, I just looked. And believed everything.

"Button up," Tina Barfield said, and Norville Keen began to comply, his long fingers moving just as slowly as they had before. The woman turned to Roger and said, with just a hint of malicious humor in her curiosity: "Now you're going to pass out, yeah?"

Very slowly, Roger straightened up. He dropped his hand from his mouth. His face was white but composed. There was no tremble to his lips. I was proud of him just then. I had been stunned beyond such a reaction, you see; Roger hadn't

been, but had managed to hold onto his coffee and bagel just the same.

"I'm not," he said, "but thank you for your concern." He paused, then added: "Bitch."

"The bitch is trying to be your fairy godmother," she said. "Can you carry those, chum?"

Roger picked up the two suitcases, then staggered. I took one of them and he gave me a grateful, sickish smile. We followed her onto the porch. The air was damp and chilly—no more than forty-five degrees—but I never tasted air that was sweeter. I took great breaths of it, smelling only the usual odors of industrial pollution. After the greenhouse, a few hydrocarbons smelled wonderful. At the curb, a Red Top Cab was idling.

"Just a couple of other things," Barfield said. She was every bit as sharp and pointed as a big executive—Sherwyn Redbone himself, perhaps—clos ing a business deal. As she talked she made her way first down the saltstained steps and then along the cracked concrete path. "First, when you hear Carlos is dead, go on behaving as if he's alive…because for awhile he will be. As a tulpa."

"Like the one that infested Richard Nixon," I said.

"Right, right—" She stopped at the head of the three steps leading down to the sidewalk and looked at me very sharply indeed. "How'd you know about that?" And before I could answer, she answered herself. "Carlos, of course. When he was alive, Norv used to tell him, 'Carlos, you'll talk yourself dead if you don't watch out.' Which is damned near what he's done.

"Anyway, Carlos won't hang around long; he won't be able to. Two months, maybe three at the outside. Because he's stupid. Brains tell, even on the Other Side."

Once again I heard the capitals. She went down the steps to the sidewalk. The cab driver got out and opened his trunk. We stowed the bags inside next to several boxed

VCRs that looked, to my admittedly inexperienced eye, as if they might have been stolen.

"Pop back into the car, big boy," Tina told the cabbie. "I'll be with you shortly."

"Time's money, lady."

"No," she said, "time ain't nothin but time. Still, drop your flag if it makes you feel better."

The cabbie retired to the driver's seat of the Red Top. Tina turned once more to us—a neat little woman, small but broad in the hip and shoulder, dressed in her best travelling suit and her smart suede beret.

"Treat him like he's still alive," she said. "As for the plant, it will soon begin its work—"

"It's already begun it," I said, because now I understood a lot. I hadn't even seen it, but I understood a lot. Herb gets a whiff of it and thinks up The Devil's General. Sandra gets a whiff and comes up with the idea for a book of scabrous jokes.

Barfield cocked one carefully plucked eyebrow at me. "Like the man said, 'Son, you ain't seen nothing yet.' It needs blood to really get rolling, but don't worry. The blood it will draw is the blood of evil or the blood of insanity. Unlike our fucked-up courts, the powers of darkness don't distinguish between the two. And any innocent blood it drinks can only come from you guys. So don't give it any."

"What do you take us for?" Roger asked.

She gave him a cynical look but said nothing…on that subject, at least. Instead, she turned back to me.

"It's going to grow like a sonofabitch. And it's going to grow everywhere, but no one will see it except for those who are already in its circle. To anyone else, it'll look like nothing but an innocent little ivy in a pot, not very healthy. You have to keep people away from it. If you have a reception area, rub garlic all over the door between there and the editorial offices. That should keep the damn thing where it belongs. People who want to go further into your offices than the

reception area should be discouraged. Unless you don't like 'em, of course; in that case invite 'em in and give 'em a beer."

"An invisible plant," Roger said. He seemed to be tasting it.

"An invisible psychic plant," I said, thinking of General Hecksler.

"Right on both counts," she said. "And now, boys, I'm going to put an egg in my shoe and beat it. Have a nice day, have a nice life and…oh, almost forgot." She turned to me again. "OUIJA says stop wasting your time. The one you're looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner. Okay? Got it?"

She was around to the back door of the cab and opening it before either of us could say anything else. I don't know about Roger, but I felt as if I had at least a thousand questions. I just didn't know what any of them were.

She turned back one final time. "Listen, boys. Don't fuck around with that thing. When you've got enough, kill it. And be careful. It can read minds. When you come for it, it'll know."

"How in God's name are we supposed to know when we've got enough?" I blurted. "That's not exactly something people are good at figuring out for themselves."

"Good question," she said. "I respect you for asking it. And you know what? I may actually have an answer for you. OUIJA says LISTEN RIDDLEY. That's Riddley with two d's. Maybe the spelling's a mistake, but the board rarely—"

"It's not a mistake," I said, "he's—"

"Riddley's the janitor, Ms. Barfield," Roger finished.

"I told you I hate that politically correct shit," she told him. "Don't you listen?" And then she was into the cab. She poked her head out the window and said, "I don't care if he's the janitor or Chester the Molester. When he tells you it's time to quit, you boys do yourselves a big favor and quit."

Her head drew back inside. A moment later she was out of our lives. At least I think she is.

I'm going to take a bathroom break, have one more drink, and then try to put a button on this. With any luck, I'll actually be able to sleep a little bit tonight.

11:45 P.M.

Okay, it was two drinks, so sue me. And now it's time for that fabled finishing burst.

Roger and I didn't talk much about what had happened on the way back. I don't know if that would sound strange to someone reading these pages (now that Ruth's out of my life, I can't imagine who that someone would be), but it seemed perfectly comfortable to me, the most normal of all reactions. I've never been in a shooting war, but I imagine people who've been in a terrible battle and come out unscathed probably behave a lot like Roger and I did while returning to the city on the Metropolitan. We talked mostly about things that didn't concern us personally. Roger said something about the loony-tune who'd shot Ronald Reagan and I mentioned that I'd read a galley of the new Peter Benchley and hadn't cared for it much. We talked a bit about the weather. Mostly, though, we were silent. We did not compare notes; we made no effort to deconstruct or rationalize our visit to the House of Flowers. In fact, I believe we only mentioned our mad field trip to Central Falls once during the entire two-hour train ride. Roger came back from the club car with sandwiches and Cokes. He passed me my share and I thanked him. I also offered to pay him. Roger laughed and said we were on expense account today —"visiting a potential author" was how he intended to write it up. And then he said in a casual just-asking voice, "That old man was really dead, wasn't he?"

"No," I said. "He was undead."

"A zombie."

"Right."

"Like in Macumba Love."

"I don't know what that is."

"A movie," he said. "The sort of thing Zenith House undoubtedly would have novelized if we'd been around in the fifties."

And that was it.

We took a cab from Penn Station to 409 Park Avenue South, Roger once more getting a receipt and putting it carefully into his wallet. I was impressed, believe me.

The cabbie let us out across the street, in front of Smiler's. There's a new bum there—an old lady with wild white hair, the usual two plastic bags filled with unlikely possessions, a cup for passersby to put change into, and a guitar that looked a thousand years old. Around her neck she wore a sign reading LET JESUS GROW IN YOUR HEART. I shuddered at the sight of it. I remember thinking, I hope one lousy zombie hasn't made me superstitious, and then turning away to hide a smile. Roger had gone into the grocery, and I didn't want the homeless lady to think I was laughing at her. It might make waiting for Roger uncomfortable. They don't mind getting into your face, those homeless people. In fact, I think they like it.

"Hey-you," she said in a raspy, almost mannish voice. "Gimme-buckI'll-play-ya-tune."

"Tell you what," I said. "I'll give you two if you won't."

"Fuck-yeah-gotta-deal," she said, which was why Roger caught me stuffing two hard-earned dollars into a crazy lady's tin cup just as he was coming out of the store. He had a brown bag in one hand and an aspirin tin in the other. As he approached the corner, he popped the tin open and shook several tablets out. He tossed these into his mouth and began crunching them up. The thought of that taste made my eyes ache.

"You really shouldn't give them money," he said as we waited for the WALK light. "It encourages them."

"You really shouldn't chew aspirin, either, but you're doing it," I said. I was in no mood for a lecture.

"True," he said, and offered me the tin as we crossed to our side of the street. "Want to try it?"

The odd thing was, I did. I took a couple and tossed them into my mouth, hating and relishing the bitter taste of the dissolving pills in equal measure. From behind us came a discordant jangle of guitar strings followed by a high and presumably female voice beginning to shriek "Just A Closer Walk With Thee."

"Inside, quick," Roger said, holding the lobby door for me. "Before my ears start to bleed."

The Metropolitan left Central Falls late and arrived at Penn Station late—it's an Amtrak thing—and the lobby of our building was almost deserted. When I glanced at my watch in the elevator, I saw that it was pressing quarter of six. "Bill, Sandra, and Herb," I said. "What are you going to tell them?"

Roger looked at me as though I were nuts. "Everything," he said. "It's the only thing I can do. The plant in Riddley's closet ain't exactly Sweet William. Which reminds me—along with everything else, we've got to get a locksmith in tomorrow to change the lock on that door. Want to know my nightmare? Riddley comes back from Sweet Home Alabama, all unsuspecting, drops by on Sunday afternoon—"

"Why would he do that?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Roger said testily. "It's a nightmare, didn't I say that? And nightmares rarely make sense. That's part of what makes them scary. Maybe he wants to check that the wastebaskets got emptied while he was gone, or something. Anyhow, he goes into his cubby, and while he's feeling around for the light-switch, something slithers around his neck."

I didn't have to ask him what sort of thing. All I had to do was remember the root that had slid its slim, earth-clotted length around Tina Barfield's shoe.

The elevator doors opened on five and we walked down the hall, past BARCO NOVEL-TEAZ and CRANDALL & OVITZ (a couple of elderly but still cannibalistic lawyers specializing in litigation and liability) and my own personal favorite, Gimme The World Travel Agency. At the far end, guarded by a pair of blessedly plastic ferns, were our double doors with ZENITH HOUSE and AN APEX COMPANY on them in gold letters, the gold as fake as the ferns.

Roger shook out his keys and opened the door. Inside was a receptionist's office with a desk, a gray carpet that at least tried not to look industrial, and walls with travel posters on them which Sandra had promoted from Rita Durst in Gimme The World. Other publishers no doubt decorate their reception areas with covers of their books blown up to poster-size, but an office decorated with oversized jacket art from Macho Man: Hanoi Firestorm, Ravisher's Moon, and Rats from Hell probably wouldn't have elevated anyone's mood.

"Tomorrow's one of LaShonda's days," I reminded Roger. LaShonda McHue comes in three days a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. She rarely ventures beyond her desk (where she mostly does her nails, calls her friends, and prinks at her hair with an Afro comb), and when Tina Barfield talked about "the circle," I don't think she meant our part-time receptionist.

"I know," Roger said. "Luckily, the ladies' room is down the hall past Novel-Teaz, and that's the only place she ever goes."

"But whatever can go wrong—"

"—will go wrong," he finished. "Yeah, yeah. I know." He fetched a deep sigh.

"So are you going to show me our new mascot?"

"I suppose I better, hadn't I?"

He lead me down the hall past his office and the other editorial offices.

We made the little left-hand jog around the corner, where there were two more doors with the water-fountain between

them. One of these doors was marked JANITOR; the other MAIL AND STORAGE. Roger picked through his keys again and put the right one in the lock of Riddley's cubby. "I locked it this morning before we left," he explained.

"Under the circumstances, that was a pretty good call," I said.

"I thought so," he agreed. I was peripherally aware of him looking at me curiously as he pushed the door open. Then I was aware of nothing but the smell. That heavenly smell.

My grandmother used to take me to the store with her when she did her shopping—this was back in Green Bay—and what I liked the best was to push the button which operated the coffee-grinder in aisle three. What I smelled now was the wonderful aroma of fresh Five O'Clock Dark Roast. I could nearly see the bag with its red label, and I had a memory, so clear it was almost reality, of a small boy poking his nose into that bag for one final deep whiff before rolling the bag closed.

"Oh, wonderful," I said in a small voice that was close to tears. My Gram has been dead for almost twenty years, but for that one moment she was alive again.

"What is it for you?" Roger asked. He sounded almost greedy. "I got strawberry shortcake, fresh out of the oven. Still hot enough to melt the whipped cream."

"It's coffee," I said, stepping in. "Fresh-ground coffee." I could even see the machine with its chrome chute and its three settings: Fine, Extra-Fine, and Coarse.

Then I saw the cubbyhole, and could say no more.

Like the greenhouse in Central Falls, it had become a jungle. But whereas in Tina Barfield's jungle there had been plants of many kinds, here there was just ivy, ivy, and more ivy. It grew everywhere, twining over the handles of Riddley's broom and window-washer, climbing along the shelves, running up the walls to the ceiling, where it grew along the tiles in tough, zig-zagging strands from which brilliant green leaves hung, some still open ing. Riddley's

mop-bucket has itself become a large steel plant-pot from which a huge bush of ivy rises in a tangle of tendrils, leaves, and…

"What are those flowers?" I asked. "Those blue flowers? Never seen anything like those before, especially not on an ivy plant."

"You've never seen anything like any of this before, period," he said.

I had to admit I had not. On one of the shelves, just below several tins of floor-wax which had been almost buried in an avalanche of green leaves, was a tiny red clay pot. That was what the plant had originally come in. I was sure of it. There was a tiny plastic tag propped against it. I leaned closer and read what was written there through a convenient gap in the leaves:

H I !
M Y N A M E I S Z E N I T H
I A M A G I F T T O J O H N
F R O M R O B E R T A

"That bastard Riddley," I said. "And just by the way, are we really supposed to believe that anyone coming in here would see nothing but one modest little ivy-plant? None of the rest of this…" I waved my arm.

"I can't answer that question for sure, but it's certainly what the lady said, isn't it? And the lady also said that anyone coming in here might not get out again."

I saw that one tendril had already grown out the door.

"You better get some garlic," I breathed. "And quick."

Roger opened the bag he'd brought out of Smiler's. I looked in and was not exactly surprised to see that it was full of garlic buds.

"You're on top of things," I said. "I have to give it to you, Roger—you're on top."

"It's why I'm the boss," he said solemnly. We stared at each other for a moment, then began to giggle. It was a supremely weird moment…but not the supremely weird moment. I suddenly realized I had an idea for a novel. This came to me, it seemed, out of a clear blue sky. That was the supremely weird moment.

And I take that clear-blue-sky thing back. The idea wafted to me on the scent of Five O'Clock Coffee, the kind I used to grind for my grandmother in Price's All-Purpose Grocery, back in Green Bay when the world was young…or when I was. I'm certainly not going to summarize my Grand Idea here—not at five past midnight—but take it from me when I say it's a good idea, one that makes Maymonth look like what it really was: a dry-wind graduate thesis masquerading as a novel.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

Roger looked at me, almost slyly. "Getting a few interesting notions, are you?"

"You know it."

"Yes," he said, "I do. I knew we had to go to Central Falls and see the Barfield woman even before you showed me that letter, Johnny. I got the idea in here. Last night. Come on, let's get out of here. Let's…" His eyes sparkled in a funny way. I'd seen it before, but couldn't remember quite where. "Let's let it grow in peace."

We spent the next fifteen minutes busting garlic buds and rubbing them up the sides of the door between Reception and Editorial. Over the lintel and the jamb, as well. The smell made my eyes water, but I suppose it'll be a little better by tomorrow. At least I hope so. By the time we finished, the place smelled as I imagine a turn-of-the-century tenement in Little Italy might, with all the women making spaghetti sauce.

"You know," I said as we finished, "we're nuts to be marking the boundary out here. What we should be doing is

putting garlic on the door to Riddley's janitor-closet. Keeping it in there."

"I don't think that's the way it's supposed to work," he said. "I think we're supposed to more or less let it loose in Editorial."

"Watch us grow," I said. I should have been afraid—I'm afraid now, God knows—but I wasn't then. And I had placed that look in his eyes, too, that feverish sparkle. My best friend in the fifth grade was a kid named Randy Wettermark. And one day, when we stopped in the candy store after school for Pez or something, Randy hawked a Spiderman comic-book. Just put it under his jacket and walked out. Roger had that same look on his face.

Christ, what a day. What an amazing day. My brain feels the way your gut does when you eat not just too much but much too much. I'm going to bed. Hope to heaven I sleep.

PART V

✯ ✯

F R O M T H E D I S P A T C H E S O F I R O N - G U T S H E C K S L E R

Apr 1 81
0600 hrs
Pk Ave So NYC

City successfully infiltrated. Objective in view. Not this very moment of course. My current location=alley behind Smiler's Market, corner Pk & 32nd. Workplace of Designated Jew almost directly across from my bivouac. Disguised as "Crazy Guitar Gertie" and worked like a charm. No gun but good knife in plastic bag #1 of "homeless person" crap. 2 foremen of the Antichrist working at Satan's House of Zenith showed up 1730 hours yesterday afternoon. One (code name ROGER DODGER) went into market. Bought garlic by smell. Supposed to improve sex-life, HA!! Other (code name JOHN THE BAPTIST) waited outside. Back to me. Could have killed him with no problem. One quick slash. Jugular and carotid. Old commando move. This old dog remembers all his old tricks. Didn't, of course. Must wait for Designated Jew. If others stay out of my way, they may live. If they don't, they will certainly die. No prisoners. BAPTIST gave me two dollars. Cheapskate! Best plan still seems to wait until weekend (i.e. Apr 4-5) and then infiltrate building. Lie low inside until Monday morning (i.e. Apr 6). Of course D.J. may come along before then but cowards travel in packs. Will do

you no good D.J. In the end, your meat is mine, HA! "Beaches are sandy, some shores are rocky, I'm going to ventilate, A Designated Mockie." More dreams of CARLOS (code name DESIGNATED SPIC). I think he is close. Wish I had a picture. Must be crafty. Guitar & wig=good props. DAY OF THE GENERAL instead of DAY OF THE JACKAL, HA!! Guitar needs new strings. Still play pretty well & still sing "like a bird in a tree." Got suppositories. Dropped load. Can think more clearly in spite of brain-killing transmissions.

Must now play waiting game.

Not the first time.

Over and out.

From *The New York Times,* April 1, 1981 Page B-1, National Report

COMMUTER CRASH KILLS 7 IN R.I.

By James Whitney *Special to The Times*

CENTRAL FALLS, RHODE ISLAND: A Cessna 404 Titan commuter airplane owned and operated by Ocean State Airways crashed shortly after takeoff from Barker Field in this small Rhode Island city yesterday afternoon, killing both pilots and all five passengers. Ocean State Airways has been running shuttle flights to New York City's LaGuardia since 1977. OCA Flight 14 was airborne for less than two minutes when it crashed in a vacant lot only a quarter of a mile from its takeoff point. Witnesses said the aircraft banked low over a warehouse, narrowly missing the roof, just before going down. "Whatever was wrong must have gone wrong right away," said Myron Howe, who was cutting weeds between Barker Field's two runways when the accident occurred. "He got upstairs and then he tried to come on back. I heard one engine cut out, then the other. I saw both props were dead. He missed the warehouse, and he missed the access road, but then he went in hard." Preliminary reports indicate no maintenance problems with the C404, which is powered by two 375 horsepower turbo-charged piston engines. The make has an excellent safety record overall, and the aircraft which crashed had less than 9000 hours on its clock, according to Ocean State Airways President George Ferguson. Officials from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB)

and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have launched a joint investigation of the crash. Killed in the accident, the first in Ocean State's four-year history, were John Chesterton, the pilot, and Avery Goldstein, the copilot, both of Pawtucket. Robert Weiner, Tina Barfield, and Dallas Mayr have been identified as three of the downed aircraft's five passengers. The identities of the other two, thought to have been husband and wife, have been withheld pending notification of next of kin. Ocean State Airways is most commonly used by passengers connecting with larger airlines operating out of LaGuardia Airport. According to Mr. Ferguson, OSA has suspended operations at least until the end of the week and perhaps longer. "I'm devastated by this," he said. "I've flown that particular craft many times, and would have sworn there wasn't a safer plane in the skies, large or small. I flew it down from Boston myself on Monday, and everything was fine with it then. I don't have any idea what could have caused both engines to shut down the way they did. One, possibly, but not both."

From John Kenton's diary

April 1, 1981

There's an old Chinese curse which goes, "May you live in interesting times." I think it must have been especially aimed at folks who keep diaries (and if they follow Roger's edict, that number will soon be increased by three: Bill Gelb, Sandra Jackson, and Herb "Give Me The World And Let Me Boss It" Porter). I sat here in my little home office—which is actually just a corner of the kitchen to which I have added a shelf and a bright light—pounding the keys of my typewriter for nearly five hours last night. Won't be that long tonight; among other things, I have a manuscript to read. And I am going to read it, I think. The dozen or so pages I got through on my way home have pretty well convinced me that this is the one I've been looking for all along, without even really knowing it.

But at least one person of my recent acquaintance won't be reading it. Not even if it's as great as Great Expectations. (Not that it will be; I have to keep reminding myself that I work at Zenith House, not Random House.) Poor woman. I don't know if she was telling the exact truth about wanting to do us a Good Turn, but even if she was lying through her teeth, no one should have to die like that, dropped out of the sky and crushed to death in a burning steel tube.

I arrived at work even earlier today, wanting to check the mail room. OUIJA says stop wasting your time, she told me. The one you're looking for is in the purple box on the bottom shelf. Way in the corner. I wanted to check that corner even

before I put on the coffee. And to get another look at Zenith the ivy, while I was down there.

At first I thought I'd beaten Roger this time, because there was no clackclack from his typewriter. But the light was on, and when I peeked in the open door of his office, there he was, just sitting behind his desk and looking out at the street.

"Morning, boss," I said. I thought he'd be ready and raring to go, but he just sat there in a semi-slump, pale and disheveled, as if he'd spent the whole night tossing and turning.

"I told you not to encourage her," he said without turning from the window.

I walked over and looked out. The old lady with the guitar, the wild white hair, and the sign about letting Jesus grow in your heart was over there in front of Smiler's again. I couldn't hear what she was singing, at least. There was that much.

"You look like you had a tough night," I said.

"Tougher morning. You seen the Times?"

I had, as a matter of fact—the front page, anyway. There was the usual report on Reagan's condition, the usual stuff about unrest in the mideast, the usual corruption-in-government story, and the usual bottom-of-the-page command to support the Fresh Air Fund. Nothing that struck me as of any immediate concern. Nevertheless, I felt a little stirring of the hairs on the back of my neck.

The Times was sitting folded over in the OUT half of Roger's IN/OUT basket. I took it.

"First page of the B section," he said, still looking out the window. At the bum, presumably...or do you call a female of the species a bumette?

I turned to the National Report and saw a picture of an airplane—what was left of one, anyway—in a weedy field littered with cast-off engine parts. In the background, a

bunch of people were standing behind a cyclone fence and gawking. I scanned the headline and knew at once.

"Barfield?" I asked.

"Barfield," he agreed.

"Christ!"

"Christ had nothing to do with it."

I scanned the piece without really reading it, just looking for her name.

And there she was: Tina Barfield of Central Falls, source of that old adage "if you play around the buzz-saw too long, sooner or later someone is gonna get cut." Or burned alive in a Cessna Titan, she should have added.

"She said she'd be safe from Carlos if she did a genuine Good Turn," Roger said. "That might lead some to deduce that what she did us was just the opposite."

"I believed her about that," I said. I think I was telling the truth, but whether I was or wasn't, I didn't want Roger deciding to uproot the ivy growing in Riddley's closet because of what had happened to Tina Barfield. Shocked as I was, I didn't want that. Then I saw—or maybe intuited—that Roger's mind wasn't running that way, and I relaxed a little.

"Actually, I did, too," he said. "She was at least trying to do a Good Turn."

"Maybe she just didn't do it soon enough," I said.

He nodded. "Maybe that was it. I read the short story she mentioned, by the way—the one by Jerome Bixby."

"'It's a Good Life.'"

"Right. By the time I'd read two pages, I recognized it as the basis of a famous Twilight Zone episode starring Billy Mumy. What the hell ever happened to Billy Mumy?"

I didn't give Shit One about what happened to Billy Mumy, but thought it might be a bad idea to say so.

"The story's about a little boy who's a super-psychic. He destroys the whole world, apparently, except for his own little circle of friends and relatives. Those people he holds hostage, killing them if they dare to cross him in any way."

I remembered the episode. The little kid hadn't pulled out anyone's heart or caused any planes to crash, but he'd turned one character—his big brother or maybe a neighbor—into a jack-in-the-box. And when he made a mess, he simply sent it away into the cornfield.

"Based on that, can you imagine what living with Carlos must have been like?" Roger asked me.

"What are we going to do, Roger?"

He turned from the window then and looked at me straight on. Frightened—I was, too—but determined. I respected him for that. And I respect myself, too.

I think.

"We're going to make Zenith House into a profitable concern if we can," he said, "and then we're going to jam about nine gallons of black ink in Harlow Enders's eye. I don't know if that plant is really a modern-day version of Jack's beanstalk or not, but if it is, we're going to climb it and get the golden harp, the golden goose, and all the gold doubloons we can carry. Agreed?"

I stuck out my hand. "Agreed, boss."

He shook it. I haven't had many fine moments before nine in the morning, at least not as an adult, but that was one of them.

"We're also going to be careful," he said. "Agreed there?"

"Agreed." It's only tonight, dear diary, that I realize what you're left with if you take the a out of agreed. I would be telling less than the truth if I didn't say that sort of haunts me.

We talked a little more. I wanted to go down and check on Zenith; Roger suggested we wait for Bill, Herb, and Sandra, then do it together.

LaShonda Evans came in before they did, complaining that the reception area smelled funny. Roger sympathized, suggested it might be mildew in the carpet, and authorized a petty-cash expenditure for a can of Glade, which can be purchased in the Smiler's across the street. He also

suggested that she leave the editors pretty much alone for the next couple of months; they were all going to be working hard, he said, trying to live up to the parent company's expectations. He didn't say "unrealistic expectations," but some people can convey a great deal with no more than a certain tone of voice, and Roger is one of them.

"It's my policy not to go any further than right here, Mr. Wade," she said, standing in the door of Roger's office and speaking with great dignity. "You're okay…and so are you, Mr. Kenton…most of the time…"

I thanked her. I've discovered that after your girl has dropped you for
some West Coast smoothie who probably knows Tai Chi and has been rolphed as est-ed to a nicety, even left-handed compliments sound pretty good.

"…but those other three are a little on the weird side."

With that, LaShonda left. I imagine she had calls to make, a few of which might even have to do with the publishing business. Roger looked at me, amused, and further rumpled his disarranged hair. "She didn't know what the smell was," he said.

"I don't think LaShonda spends a lot of time in the kitchen."

"When you look like LaShonda, I doubt if you need to," Roger said. "The only time you smell garlic is when the waiter brings your Shrimp Mediterranean."

"Meanwhile," I said, "there's Glade. And the garlic-smell will be gone before long, anyway. Unless, of course, you're either a bloodhound or a supernatural houseplant."

We looked at each other for a moment, then burst out laughing. Maybe just because Tina Barfield was dead and we were alive. Not very nice, I know, but the day brightened from that point on; that much, at least, I'm sure of.

Roger had left little notes on Herb's, Sandra's, and Bill's desks. By ninethirty we were all gathered in Roger's office, which doubles as our editorial conference room. Roger

began by saying that he thought both Herb and Sandra had been aided in their inspirations, and with no more preamble than that, he told them the story of our trip to Rhode Island. I helped as much as I could. We both tried to express how strange our visit to the greenhouse had been, how otherworldly, and I believe all three of them understood most of that. When it came to Norville Keen, however, I don't think either Roger or I really got the point across.

Bill and Herb were sitting side by side on the floor, as they often do during our editorial conferences, drinking coffee, and I saw them exchange a glance of the kind in which eyeballs rolling heavenward play a crucial part. I thought about trying to press the point, then didn't. If I may misquote the wisdom of Norville Keen:"You can't believe in a zombie unless you've seen that zombie."

Roger finished the job by handing Bill that day's B section of The New York Times. We waited as it made the rounds.

"Oh, poor woman," Sandra said. She had dragged in her office chair and was sitting in it with her knees primly together. No sitting on the floor for Mr. and Mrs. Jackson's little girl. "I never fly unless I have to. It's much more dangerous than they let on."

"This is crap," Bill said. "I mean, I love you, Roger, but this really is crap. You've been under pressure—you too, John, especially since you got the gate from your girlfriend—and you guys've just…I don't know…let your imaginations run away with you."

Roger nodded as if he had expected no less. He turned to Herb. "What do you think?" he asked him.

Herb stood up and hitched his belt in that take-charge way of his. "I think we ought to go take a look at the famous ivy plant."

"Me too," Sandra said.

"You guys don't actually believe this, do you?" Bill Gelb asked. He sounded both amused and alarmed. "I mean, let's

not dial 1-800-MASSHYSTERIA just yet, okay?"

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything," Sandra said. "Not for sure. All I know for sure is that I got my idea about the joke-book after I was down there. After I smelled baking cookies. And why would the janitor's room smell like my grandma's kitchen, anyway?"

"Maybe for the same reason the reception area smells like garlic," Bill said. "Because these guys have been playing jokes." I opened my mouth to say that Sandra had smelled cookies and Herb toast and jam in Riddley's cubicle the day before Roger and I made our trip to Central Falls, but before I could, Bill said: "What about the plant, Sandy? Did you see an ivy growing all over the place in there?"

"No, but I didn't turn on the light," she said. "I just peeped my head in, and then…I don't know…I got a little scared. Like it was spooky, or something."

"It was spooky in spite of the smell of gramma's baking cookies, or because of it?" Bill asked. Like a TV-show prosecutor hammering some hapless defense witness.

Sandra looked at him defiantly and said nothing. Herb tried to take her hand, but she shook it off.

I stood up. "Enough talk. Why describe a guest when you can see that guest?"

Bill looked at me as if I'd flipped my lid. "Say what?"

"I believe that in his own inimitable way, John is trying to express the idea that seeing is believing," Roger said. "Let's go have a look. And may I suggest you all keep your hands to yourselves? I don't think it bites—not us, anyway—but I do think we'd be wise to be careful."

It sounded like damned good advice to me. As Roger lead us down the hall past our offices in a little troop, I found myself remembering the last words of the rabbit general in Richard Adams's Watership Down: "Come back, you fools! Come back! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

When we got to the place where the hall jogs to the left, Bill said: "Hey, hold it, just a goddam minute." Sounding

extremely suspicious. And a little bit spooked, maybe, as well.

"What is it, William?" Herb asked, all innocence. "Smelling something nice?"

"Popcorn," he said. His hands were clenched.

"Good smell, is it?" Roger asked gently.

Bill sighed. His hands opened…and all at once his eyes filled with tears. "It smells like The Nordica," he said. "The Nordica Theater, in Freeport, Maine. It's where we used to go to the show when I was a kid growing up in Gates Falls. It was only open on weekends, and it was always a double feature. There were great big wooden fans in the ceiling and they'd go around during the show…whoosh, whoosh, whoosh…and the popcorn was always fresh. Fresh popcorn with real butter on it in a plain brown bag. To me that's always been the smell of dreams. I just…Is this a joke? Because if it is, tell me right now."

"No joke," I said. "I smell coffee. Five O'Clock brand, and stronger than ever. Sandra, do you still smell cookies?"

She looked at me with dreamy eyes, and right then I sort of understood why Herb is so totally gone on her (yes, we all know it; I think even Riddley and LaShonda know it; the only one who doesn't know it is Sandra herself). Because she was beautiful.

"No," she said, "I smell Shalimar. That was the first perfume I ever had. My Aunt Coretta gave it to me for my birthday, when I was twelve." Then she looked at Bill, and smiled warmly. "That was what dreams smelled like to me. Shalimar perfume."

"Herb?" I asked.

For a minute I didn't think he was going to say anything; he was cheesed at the way she was looking at Bill. But then he must have decided this was a little bit bigger than his crush on Sandra.

"Not toast and jam today," he said. "New car today. To me that's the best smell on earth. It was when I was seventeen

and couldn't afford one, and I guess it still is now."

Sandra said, "You still can't afford one."

Herb sighed, shrugged. "Yeah, but…fresh wax…new leather…"

I turned to Roger. "What about—" Then I stopped. Bill was only brimming, but Roger Wade was outright weeping. Tears ran down his face in two silent streams.

"My mother's garden, when I was very small," he said in a thick, choked voice. "How I loved that smell. And how I loved her."

Sandra put an arm around him and gave him a little hug. Roger wiped his eyes with his sleeve and tried a smile. Did pretty well, too, for someone remembering his beloved dead mother.

Now Bill pushed ahead. I let him, too. We followed him around the corner to the door just left of the drinking fountain, the one marked JANITOR. He threw it open, started to say something smartass—it might have been Come out, come out, wherever you are—and then stopped. His hands went up in an involuntary warding-off gesture, then dropped again.

"Holy Jesus get-up-in-the-morning," he whispered, and the rest of us crowded around him.

Writing in this journal yesterday, I said that Riddley's closet had become a jungle, but yesterday I didn't understand what a jungle was. I know that must sound strange after my tour of Tina Barfield's greenhouse in Central Falls, but it's true. Riddley won't be shooting dice with Bill Gelb in there anymore, I can tell you that. The room is now a densely packed mass of shiny green leaves and tangled vines, rising from the floor to the ceiling. Within it you can still see a few gleams of metal and wood—the mop-bucket, the broom-handle—but that's it. The shelves are buried. The fluorescent lights overhead are barely visible. The smells that came out at us, although good, were almost overpowering.

And then there was a sigh. We all heard it. A kind of whispered, exhaled greeting.

An avalanche of leaves and stems fell out at our feet and sprawled across the floor. Several tendrils went snaking over the linoleum. The speed with which this happened was scary. If you'da blinked, you'da missed it, as my father might have said. Sandra screamed, and when Herb put his arms around her shoulders, she didn't seem to mind a bit.

Bill stepped forward and drew his leg back, apparently meaning to kick the rapidly snaking ivy-branches back into the janitor's closet. Or to try. Roger grabbed his shoulder. "Don't do that! Leave it be! It doesn't mean to hurt us! Can't you feel that? Don't you know from the smell?"

Bill stopped, so I guess he did. We watched as several tendrils of ivy climbed up the wall of the corridor. A few of these began to explore the gray steel sides of the water fountain, and when I left the office tonight, the fountain was pretty much buried. It looks as if those of us who like a drink of water every now and then during the course of the day are going to be buying Evian at Smiler's from now on.

Sandra squatted down and held out her hand, the way you might hold your hand out for a strange dog to sniff. I didn't like to see her that way, not while she was so close to the green avalanche we'd let out of the janitor's closet. In its shadow, so to speak. I reached out to pull her back, but Roger stopped me. He had a queer little smile on his face. "Let her," he said.

A tendril as thick as a branch detached itself from the nearly solid clump of green bulging through the doorway. It reached out to her, trembling, seeming almost to sniff its way to her. It slid around her wrist and she gasped. Herb started forward and Roger yanked him back. "Leave her alone! It's all right!" he said.

"Do you swear?"

Roger's lips were pressed together so tightly they were almost gone. "No," he said in a small voice. "But I think."

"It is all right," Sandra said dreamily. She watched as the tendril slid delicately up her bare arm in a spiral of green and brown, seeming to caress her bare skin as it went. It looked like some exotic snake. "It says it's a friend."

"That's what the Pilgrims told the Indians," Bill said bleakly.

"It says it loves me," she said, now sounding almost ecstatic. We watched as the tip of the moving tendril slipped under the short sleeve of her blouse. A small green leaf near the tip went under next, lifting the cloth a bit. It was like watching some new kind of Hindu fakir at work, a plant charmer instead of a snake charmer. "It says it loves all of us. And it says..." Another tendril snaked loosely around one of her knees, then slipped tenderly down her calf in a loose coil.

"It says one of us is missing," Herb said. I looked around and saw that Herb's shoes had disappeared. He was standing ankle-deep in ivy.

Roger and I walked to the closet's doorway and stood there with the leaves brushing the fronts of our coats. I thought how easy it would be for that thing to grab us by the ties. A couple of long hard yanks and presto—a pair of editors strangled by their own cravats. Then several coils of ivy wrapped themselves around my wrists in loose bracelets, and all those paranoid, fearful thoughts dropped away.

Now, sitting at my apartment desk and pounding away at my old typewriter (also smoking like a furnace again, I'm sorry to say), I can't remember exactly what came next... except that it was warm and comforting and quite a bit more than pleasant. It was lovely, like a warm bath when your back aches, or chips of ice when your mouth is hot and your throat is sore.

What an outsider would have seen, I don't know. Probably not much, if Tina Barfield was telling the truth when she said no one could see it but us; probably just five slightly scruffy editors, four of them on the youngish side (and Herb, who's

pushing fifty, would look young at a more respectable publisher's conference table, where the ages of most editors seem to range between sixty-five and dead), standing around the door of the janitor's closet.

What we saw was it. The plant. Zenith the common ivy. It had now expanded (and relaxed) all around us, feeling along the corridor with its tendrils and climbing the walls with its rhizomes, as eager and frisky as a colt let out of the stable on a warm May morning. It had both of Sandra's arms, it had my wrists, it had Bill and Herb by the feet. Roger had grown a loose green necklace, and didn't seem worried about it at all.

We saw it and we experienced it. The physical fact of it and the reassuring mental warmth of it. It experienced us in the same fashion, united us in a way that turned us into a small but perfect mental choir. And yes, I am saying exactly what I seem to be saying, that while we stood there in the grip of those many thin but tough tendrils, we shared a telepathic link. We saw into each others' hearts and minds. I don't know why I should find that so amazing after all the other stuff that's happened—the fact that yesterday I saw a dead man reading a newspaper, for instance—but I do.

Zenith had asked about Riddley. It seemed to have a special interest in the man who had taken it in, given it a place to grow, and enough water to allow it a fragile purchase on life. We assured it (him?) in our choir voice that Riddley was fine, Riddley was away but would be back soon. The plant seemed satisfied. The tendrils holding our arms and legs (not to mention Roger's neck) let go. Some dropped to the floor, some simply withdrew.

"Come on," Roger said quietly. "Let's go."

But for a moment we stood there, looking at it wonderingly. I thought of Tina Barfield telling us to just give it a DDT shower when we were done with it, when we'd gotten what we needed from it, and for a moment I was actually glad she was dead. Coldhearted bitch deserved to

be dead, I thought. To talk about killing something that was so powerful and yet so obviously tame and friendly…profit-motive aside, that was just sick.

"All right," Sandra said at last. "Come on, you guys."

"I don't believe it," Bill said. "I see it but I don't believe it."

Except we knew he did. We'd seen it and felt it in his mind.

"What about the door?" Herb asked. "Open or closed?"

"Don't you dare close it," Sandra said indignantly. "You'll cut off some of its little branches if you do."

Herb stepped back from the door and looked at Bill. "Are you convinced, O Doubting Thomas?"

"You know I am," Bill said. "Don't rub it in, okay?"

"Nobody is going to rub anything in," Roger said brusquely. "We've got more important things to do. Now come on."

He lead us back toward Editorial, smoothing his tie as he went and then tucking it into his belt. I paused just once, at the jog in the corridor, and looked back. I was convinced that it would be gone, that the whole thing had been some sort of wacky five-way hallucination, but it was still there, a green flood of leaves and a brownish tangle of limber vines, a good many now crawling up the wall.

"Amazing," Herb breathed beside me.

"Yes," I said.

"And all that stuff that happened in Rhode Island? All that's true?"

"It's all true," I agreed.

"Come on," Roger called. "We've got a lot to talk about."

I started moving, but then Herb caught my arm. "I almost wish old Iron-Guts wasn't dead," he said. "Can you imagine how something like this would blow his mind?"

I didn't respond to this, but I was thinking plenty, most of it having to do with Tina Barfield's note.

Back in Roger's office again, Roger behind his desk, me in the chair beside it, Sandra in her chair, Bill and Herb once more sitting on the carpet with their legs stretched out and their backs to the wall.

"Any questions?" Roger asked, and we all shook our heads. Someone reading this diary—someone outside of these events, in other words—would no doubt find that incredible: how in God's name could there be no questions? How could we have avoided spending at least the rest of the morning speculating about the invisible world? More likely the rest of the day?

The answer's simple: it was because of the mind-meld. We had come to a mutual understanding few people are able to manage. And there's also the small fact that we have a business to save—our meal-tickets, if you want to get down and dirty about it. Getting down and dirty seems easier for me since Ruth kissed me off—perhaps the prolixity will go next. I can hope, anyway. I'll tell you something about the fabled meal-ticket, since I'm on the subject. You worry when you're in danger of losing it, but you don't become truly frantic until you're in danger of losing it and you realize it could possibly be saved. If, that is, you move very quickly and don't stumble. Fatalism is a crutch. I never knew that before, but I do now.

And one more thing about the "no questions" thing. People can get used to anything—quadriplegia, hair loss, cancer, even finding out your beloved only daughter just joined the Hare Krishnas and is currently sparechanging business travelers at Stapleton International in a pair of fetching orange pajamas. We adapt. An invisible, telepathy-inducing ivy is just one more thing to get used to. We'll worry about the ramifications later, maybe. Right then we had a pair of books to work on: World's Sickest Jokes and The Devil's General.

The only one of us to have problems getting with the program was Herb Porter, and his distraction had nothing to

do with Zenith the common ivy. At least not directly. He kept shooting reproachful, bewildered glances at Sandra, and thanks to the mind-meld, I knew why. Bill and Roger did, too. It seems that over the last half-year or so, Mr. Riddley Walker of Bug's Anus, Alabama has been waxing more than the floors here at Zenith House.

"Herb?" Roger asked. "Are you with us or agin us?"

Herb kind of snapped around, like a man who's just been awakened from a doze. "Huh? Yeah! Of course!"

"I don't think you are, not entirely. And I want you with us. The good bark Zenith has sprung one hell of a nasty leak, in case you haven't noticed. If we're going to keep her from sinking, we need all hands at the pumps. No frigging in the rigging. Do you take my point?"

"I take it," Herb said sullenly.

Sandra, meanwhile, gave him a look which contained nothing but perplexity. I think she knows what Herb knows (and that we all know). She just can't understand why in God's name Herb would care. Men don't understand women, I know that's true...but women deeply don't understand men. And if they did, they probably wouldn't have much to do with us.

"All right," Roger said, "suppose you tell us what, if anything, is being done with the General Hecksler book."

To Roger's delight and amazement, a great deal has been done on the Iron-Guts bio, and in a very short time. While Roger and I were in Central Falls, Herb Porter was one busy little bee. Not only has he engaged Olive Barker as the ghost on The Devil's General, he's gotten her solemn promise to deliver a sixty thousand-word first draft in just three weeks.

To say that I was surprised by this quick action would be drawing it mild. In my previous experience, Herb Porter only moves fast when Riddley comes down the hall yelling, "Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine! Dey's doughnuts in de kitchenette, and dey sho are fine!"

"Three weeks, man, I don't know," Bill said dubiously. "Stroke aside, Olive's got this little problem." He mimed swallowing a handful of pills.

"That's the best part," Herb said. "Mademoiselle Barker is clean, at least for the time being. She's going to those meetings and everything. You know she was always the fastest on-demand writer we had when she was straight."

"Clean copy, too," I said. "At least it used to be."

"Can she stay clean for three weeks, do you think?"

"She'll stay clean," Herb said grimly. "For the next three weeks, I'm Olive Barker's personal sponsor. She gets calls three times a day. If I hear so much as a single slurred s, and I'm over there with a stomach-pump. And an enema bag."

"Please," Sandra said, grimacing.

Herb ignored her. "But that's not all. Wait."

He darted out, crossed the hall to the glorified closet that's his office (on the wall is a poster-sized photo of General Anthony Hecksler which Herb throws darts at when he's bored), and came back with a sheaf of paper. He looked uncharacteristically shy as he put them in Roger's hands.

Instead of looking at the manuscript—because of course that was what it was—Roger looked at Herb, eyebrows raised.

For a moment I thought Herb was having an allergic reaction, perhaps as a result of some skin sensitivity to ivy leaves. Then I realized he was blushing. I saw this, but the idea still seems foreign to me, like the idea of Clint Eastwood blubbering into his mommy's lap.

"It's my account of the Twenty Psychic Garden Flowers business," Herb said. "I think it's pretty good, actually. Only about thirty per cent of it is actually true—I never tackled Iron-Guts and brought him to his knees when he showed up here waving a knife, for instance…"

True enough, I thought, since Hecksler never showed up here at all, to the best of our knowledge.

"…but it makes good reading. I…I was inspired." Herb lowered his face for a moment, as if the idea of inspiration struck him as somehow shameful. Then he raised his head again and looked around at us defiantly. "Besides, the goddam loony's dead, and I don't expect any trouble from his sister, especially if we bring her into the tent to help with the book and slip her a couple of hundred for her…well, call it creative assistance."

Roger was looking through the pages Herb had handed him, pretty much ignoring this flood of verbiage. "Herb," he said. "There's…my goodness gracious, there's thirty-eight pages here. That's close to ten thousand words. When did you do it?"

"Last night," he said, looking down at the floor again. His cheeks were brighter than ever. "I told you, I was inspired."

Sandra and Bill looked impressed, but not as impressed as I felt. To the best of my knowledge, only Thomas Wolfe was a ten-thousand-a-day man. Certainly it overshadows my pitiful clackings on this Olivetti. And as Roger leafed through the pages again, I saw less than a dozen strikeovers and interlinings. God, he must have been inspired.

"This is terrific, Herb," Roger said, and there was no doubting the sincerity in his voice. "If the writing's okay—based on your memos and summaries I have every reason to think it will be—it's going to be the heart of the book." Herb flushed again, this time I think with pleasure.

Sandra was looking at his manuscript. "Herb, do you think writing that so fast…do you think it had anything to do with…you know…"

"Sure it did," Bill said. "Must have. Don't you think so, Herb?"

I could see Herb struggling, wanting to take credit for the ten thousand words that were going to form the dramatic heart of The Devil's General, and then (I swear this is true) I could sense his thoughts turning to the plant, to the

spectacular richness of it when Bill Gelb yanked open the door and it came sprawling out of its closet.

"Of course it was the plant," he said. "I mean, it had to have been. I've never written anything that good in my life."

And I could guess who the hero of the piece would turn out to be, but I kept my mouth shut. On that subject, at least. On another one, I thought it prudent to open it.

"In Tina Barfield's letter to me," I said, "she told me that when we read about Carlos's death, not to believe it. Then she said, 'Like the General.' I repeat: 'Like the General.' "

"That is utter and complete bullshit," Herb said, but he sounded uneasy, and a lot of the color faded out of his cheeks. "The guy crawled into a goddamned gas oven and gave himself a Viking funeral. The cops found his gold teeth, each engraved with the number 7, for 7th Army. And if that's not enough, they also found the lighter Douglas MacArthur gave him. He never would have given that up. Never."

"So maybe he's dead," Bill said. "According to Roger and John, this guy Keen was dead, too, but he was still lively enough to read the used-car ads in the newspaper."

"Mr. Keen just had his heart torn out, though," Herb said. He spoke almost nonchalantly, as if getting your heart torn out was roughly the same as ripping a hangnail off on the trunk-latch of your car. "There wasn't anything left of Iron-Guts but ashes, teeth, and a few lumps of bone."

"There is, however, that tulpa business," Roger reminded him. All of us sitting around and discussing this stuff with perfect calmness, as though it were the plot of Anthony LaScorbia's newest big-bug book.

"What exactly is a tulpa?" Bill asked.

"I don't know," Roger said, "but I will tomorrow."

"You will?"

"Yes. Because you're going to research the subject at the New York Public Library before you go home tonight."

Bill groaned. "Roger, that's not fair! If there's a military-type tulpa out there, it's Herb's tulpa."

"Nevertheless, this particular bit of research is your baby," Roger said, and gave Bill a severe look. "Sandra's got the joke book and Herb's got the nut book. You owe me an inspiration. In the meantime, I expect you to check into the wonderful world of tulpas."

"What about him?" Bill asked sulkily. The him he was looking at was yours truly.

"John also has a project," Roger told him. "Don't you, John?"

"That I do," I replied, reminding myself again not to go home without diving back into the dusty atmosphere of the mailroom at least one more time. According to Tina, what I'd been looking for was in a purple box, on the bottom shelf, and way back in the corner.

No, not according to Tina.

According to OUIJA.

"It's time to go to work," Roger said, "but I want to make three suggestions before I turn you loose. The first is that you stay away from the janitor's closet, no matter how drawn to it you may feel. If the urge gets really strong, do what the alkies do: call someone else who may have the same problem and talk about it until the urge goes away. Okay?"

His eyes swept us: Sandra once more sitting as prim and neat as a freshman coed at her first sorority social, Herb and Bill side by side on the floor, Mr. Stout and Mr. Narrow. Roger's baby blues touched me last. None of us said anything out loud, but Roger heard us just the same. That's the way it is at Zenith House right now. It's amazing, and most of the world would no doubt find it flat unbelievable, but that's the way it is. For better or worse. And because what he heard was what he wanted, Roger nodded and sat back, relaxing a bit.

"Second thing. You may feel the urge to tell someone outside this office about what has happened here...what is happening. I urge you with all my heart not to do it."

He doesn't have to worry about it. We won't, none of us. It's ordinary human nature to want to confide a great and wonderful secret to which you have become privy, but not this time. I didn't need telepathy to know that; I saw it in their eyes. And I remembered something rather unpleasant from my childhood. There was this kid who lived up the street from me, not the world's nicest one by any means—Tommy Flannagan. He was skinny as a rail. He had a sister, maybe a year or two younger, who was much heavier. And sometimes he would chase her until she cried, yelling Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts! I don't know if poor little Jenny Flannagan was a greedy-guts or not, but I know that's what we looked like right then, the five of us: a bunch of greedy-guts editors sitting around in Roger Wade's office.

That look haunts me, because I'm sure it was on my face, too. The plant feels good. It gives off good smells. Its touch isn't slimy, not repulsive; it feels like a caress. A life-giving caress. Sitting here now, my eyes drooping after another long day (and I still have reading to do, if I can ever finish this entry), I wish I could feel it again. I know it would revive me, cheer me up and rev me up. And yet, some drugs also make you feel good, don't they? Even while they're killing you, they're making you feel good. Maybe that's nonsense, a little Puritanical holdover like a race memory, or maybe it's not. I just don't know. And for the time being, I guess it doesn't matter. Still...

Greedy-guts, greedy-guts, greedy-greedy-greedy-guts.

There was a moment of silence in the office and then Sandra said, "No one's going to spill the beans, Roger."

Bill: "It's not just about saving our jobs in this lousy pulp-mill, either."

Herb: "We want to stick it to that prick Enders as bad as you do, Roger. Believe it."

"Okay," Roger said. "I do. Which brings me to the last thing. John has been keeping a diary."

I almost jumped out of my seat and started to ask how he knew that— I hadn't told him—then realized I didn't have to. Thanks to Zenith down there in Riddley Walker country, we know a lot about each other now. More than is healthy for us, probably.

"It's a good idea," Roger went on. "I suggest you all start keeping diaries."

"If we're really going to crash a bunch of new books into production, I don't expect to have time to wash my own hair," Sandra grumbled. As if she'd been put in charge of editing a newly discovered James Joyce manuscript instead of World's Sickest Jokes.

"Nevertheless, I strongly suggest you find time for this," Roger said. "Written journals might not be worth much if things turn out the way we hope, but they could be invaluable if things don't...well, let's just say that we don't have any clear idea of what forces we're playing with here."

"He who takes a tiger by the tail dares not let go," Bill said. He spoke in a kind of baleful mutter.

"Nonsense," Sandra said. "It's only a plant. And it's good. I felt that very strongly."

"A lot of people thought Adolf Hitler was just the bee's knees," I said, which earned me a sharp stare from the senorita.

"I keep going back to the thing Barfield said about the plant needing blood to really get rolling," Roger said. "The blood of evil or the blood of insanity. I don't really understand that, and I don't like it. The idea that we're raising a vampire vine in the janitor's closet..."

"And no longer just in the janitor's closet," I added, earning myself dirty looks from Sandra and Herb, plus a puzzled, rather uneasy one from Bill.

"I'd just as soon it didn't sample blood of any kind, that's all," Roger said. "Things are rolling quite enough to suit our purposes right now." He cleared his throat. "I think we're playing with high explosives here, people, and in a case like

that, record-keeping can come in handy. Notes and jottings are really all I'm asking for."

"If they were ever read in court, journals about this stuff would probably end us up in Oak Cove," Herb said. "That's the nut-farm old Iron-Guts broke out of, just in case any of you forgot."

"Better Oak Cove than Attica," I said.

"That's comforting, John," Sandra said. "That's very comforting."

"Don't worry, sweetheart," Bill said, reaching out and giving her ankle a pat. "I think they send the ladies to Ossining."

"Yes," she said. "Where I can discover the joys of Sapphic love with a three-hundred-pound biker chick."

"Stop it, all of you," Roger said impatiently. "It's a precaution, that's all. There's really no downside to this. Not if we're careful."

It wasn't until then that I realized just how desperately Roger wants to turn Zenith House around, now that he has the chance. How much he wants to save his reputation now that there's a real chance to save it. I thought again of that rabbit general yelling, "Come back, you fools! Dogs aren't dangerous!"

I believe that, in the days and weeks ahead, Roger Wade will bear watching. The others, too. And myself, of course.

Maybe myself most of all.

"I think I'm ready for a little vacation in Oak Cove, anyway," Bill said. "I feel as if I'm reading you guys' minds, and that's got to be crazy."

No one said anything. No one really needed to.

Dear diary, we're past that point.

I spent the rest of the day recovering my more-or-less normal existence. I removed a long, dull dinner-party scene from Olive's latest Windhover opus and, mindful of the late great Tina Barfield, left in a rough-sex scene that really is rough (at one point a blunt object is inserted in an unlikely

place with unlikely, ecstatic results). I tracked down a culinary consultant through the New York Public Library, and she has agreed, for the sum of four hundred dollars (which we can barely afford) to go through the recipes in Janet Freestone-Love's Your New Astral Cookbook and try to assure me that there's nothing poisonous in there. Cookbooks are invariably moneymakers, even the bad ones, but few people outside this crazy business realize they can also be dangerous; fuck up a few ingredients and people can die. Ludicrous, but it happens. I went to lunch with Jinky Carstairs, who is novelizing the lesbo-vampire piece of shit we're stuck with (burgers at Burger Heaven, how chi-chi) and had a drink after work with Rodney Slavinksy, who writes the Coldeye Denton westerns under the name of Bart I. Straight. The Coldeyes don't do diddly-dick in the U.S. market, but for some reason they've found an audience in France, Germany, and Japan. We share in those rights. Greedy-guts, greedy-guts.

Before meeting with Rodney—who is one gay cowpoke, pardner—I went back down to the mailroom, stepping over a twisted, twined mat of ivy branches and stems to get there. It's possible to do that without actually treading on any, for which I am grateful. The last thing I needed at three in the afternoon was the pained scream of a psychic ivy suffering a bad case of stompie-toes.

Mostly, Zenith appears to be growing up the wall on either side of the janitor's cubby, creating a complex pattern of green and brown, through which the cream-colored wallboard shows in pleasant geometric patterns. I didn't hear it sighing this time, but I could swear I heard it breathing, warm and deep and comforting, just within the range of audibility. And again there was a smell, this time not coffee but honeysuckle. I also have fond childhood memories of that smell; it surrounded the library where I spent a great many happy hours as a boy. And as I passed, one strand of ivy reached out and touched my cheek. Not

just a touch, either. It was a caress. One great thing I have discovered about keeping a diary: I can be honest here if nowhere else, honest enough in this case to say that that leafy touch made me think of Ruth, who used to touch me in just that way.

I stood perfectly quiet while that delicate bit of stem slipped up to my temple, traced my eyebrow, and then fell away. Before it did, I had a very clear thought, and I'm positive it came from Zenith rather than from my own mind:

Find the purple box.

Find it I did, exactly where the Barfield woman—or her Ouija board —said I would, way back in the corner on the bottom shelf, behind a pair of huge padded mailers oozing out flakes of stuffing. It is the sort of box that medium-grade typing paper comes in. The sender—one James Saltworthy of Queens—simply taped the box shut and slapped a mailing sticker over the ragland bond brand name and logo. His address is in the upper lefthand corner, on another sticker. I think it's sort of amazing that the post office accepted such a package and managed to get it here, but they did, and now it's all mine. Sitting on the floor of the mailroom, smelling dust and honeysuckle, I broke the tape and lifted the box-lid. Inside is about four hundred pages of copy, I should judge, under a title page which reads

THE LAST SURVIVOR By James Saltworthy

And, down in the far corner:

Selling North American Rights
Literary Agent: Self
Approx 195,000 Words

There was also a letter, addressed this way: TO THE EDITOR—OR WHOEVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK WHERE THEY CAME FROM. As with the

Tina Barfield letter, I have attached it. I'm not going to critique or analyze it here, and there's probably no reason to do so at all. Writers who have been trying to get their books published over a long period of time—five years, sometimes ten years, and once in my experience a full fifteen years which encompassed ten unpublished novels, three of them very long—share a similar tone, which I would describe as a thin coat of self-pitying cynicism stretched over a well of growing despair and, in many cases, hysteria. In my imagination, which is probably too vivid, these people always seem like miners who have somehow survived a terrible cave-in, people trapped in the dark and screaming Is there anyone out there? Please, is anyone out there? Can anyone hear me?

What I thought as I folded the letter back into the envelope was that if ever there was a name that sounds as if it should belong to a writer, that name is James Saltworthy. My next thought was to just put the top back on the box and leave whatever was under the title page, good or bad, until I got home. But there's a little Pandora in most of us, I think, and I couldn't resist a look. And before I knew about it, I'd read the first eight or nine pages. It reads that easily, that naturally. It can't be as good as it seems to be, I know that, or it wouldn't be here. And yet a part of me whispers that that might not be true. He is serving as his own agent, and writers who do that are like self-defending lawyers: they have fools for clients.

The pages I read were good enough so I have burned to read the rest ever since leaving the office; my mind keeps going back to Tracy Nordstrom, the charming psycho who is apparently going to be Saltworthy's main character. There's a war going on in my head, the armies of Hope on one side,

those of Cynicism on the other. This conflict, I feel, is going to be decided in the two hours between now and midnight, when I really must turn in. But before leaving the typewriter chair in the kitchen for my reading chair in the living room area of my apartment, I must add one more thing.

When I stood up with Saltworthy's purple box under my arm, I noticed that Zenith the common ivy has burst through the wall between the janitor's closet and the mailroom in at least three dozen places. There are ten steel shelves mounted on that wall, plain gray utilitarian things which are now perfectly empty—in my post-Ruth orgy of work, I cleaned them out completely, without finding a single thing even remotely worth publishing. In most cases it's not even incompetency—boring narration and dull prose— but outright illiteracy. Not one but several of the manuscripts which filled those gray shelves were scrawled in pencil.

But all that's to the side. My point here is just that I could see that wall, because the stacks and jumbles of boxes, bags, and mailers are gone. The cream-colored sheetrock has now been pierced by a galaxy of green stars. In many cases the tips of the ivy's branches have only begun to penetrate, but in others, long and fragile snakelets have already slithered through. They are growing along the empty steel shelves, meeting, twining, climbing, descending. Staking out new territory, in other words. Most of the leaves are still tightly furled, like sleeping infants, but a few have already begun to open. I have a strong suspicion that within a week or two, a month at the outside, the mailroom is going to be as full of Zenith as Riddley's cubbyhole is now.

Which leads to an amusing but perfectly valid question: where are we going to put Riddley when he comes back? And what, exactly, will he be doing?

Enough. Time to see exactly what's in James Saltworthy's box.

April 2, 1981

Dear God. Oh my dear God. I feel like someone who has dipped his fishing line into a little country brook and has managed to hook Moby Dick. I had actually dialed the first five digits of Roger Wade's number before realizing that it's two o'clock in the fucking morning. It'll have to wait, but I don't know how I can wait. I feel like I'm going to explode. Names and book-titles keep dancing through my head. The Naked and the Dead, by Norman Mailer. Raintree County, by Ross Lockridge. Peyton Place, by Grace Metalious. The Godfather, by Mario Puzo. The Exorcist, by William Peter Blatty. Jaws, by Peter Benchley. Different kinds of books, different kinds of writers, some good, some only competent, but all of them creating a kind of bottled lightning, stories that millions of people simply had to read. Saltworthy's Last Survivor fits very neatly into this group. No goddam doubt about it. I don't think I've found a Masterpiece, but I know I've found The Next Big Thing.

If we let this get away, I'll shoot myself.

No.

I'll walk into Riddley's closet and tell Zenith to strangle me.

My God, what an incredible book. What an incredible story.

February 19, 1981

Editorial Staff and/or Mailroom Crew Zenith House
490 Park Avenue South New York, NY 10017

TO THE EDITOR—OR WHOEVER SENDS THESE THINGS BACK WHERE
THEY COME FROM,

My name is James Saltworthy, and the attached albatross is a book I wrote. *Last Survivor* is a novel that was set five years in the future when I wrote it in 1977, and now by God that future's almost here! Looks like the joke's on me. This novel, which has been well-reviewed by both my wife and my department head (I teach 5th grade English at Our Lady of Hope in Queens), has been to a total of twenty-three publishers. I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but since Zenith House is this manuscript's final stop on what has been a long and exceedingly dull train-ride to nowhere, I have decided to "let it all hang out," as we used to say back in the Sexy Sixties, when we all thought we had at least one major novel in us.

I would guess that at several of the publishing houses where *Last Survivor* visited—sort of like an unwelcome in-law that you get rid of as soon as possible—it was actually read (*partially* read might be a better way to put it). From Doubleday came the response "We are looking for more upbeat fiction." Cheers! From Lippincott: "The writing is good, the characters distasteful, the storyline frankly unbelievable." Mazel tov! From Putnam's came that old favorite: "We no longer look at unagented material." Hooray!

Agents, schmagents. My first one died on me—he was eighty-one and senile. The second was a crook. The third told me he loved my novel, then offered to sell me some Amway.

I am enclosing $5.00 for return postage. If you feel like using it to send my story back to me after you finish not reading it, that would be fine. If you want to use it to buy a couple of beers, all I can say is cheers! Mazel tov! Hooray! Meantime, I see that Rosemary Rogers, John Saul, and John Jakes are still selling well, so I guess American literature is doing fine and forging bravely forward toward the 21st century. Who needs Saltworthy?

I wonder if there's money in writing instruction manuals. There certainly isn't much in teaching fifth graders, some of whom carry switchblade knives and sell drugs around the corner. I suppose they wouldn't believe that at Doubleday, would they?

Cordially,

Jim Saltworthy
73 Aberdeen Road
Queens, New York 11432
From Roger Wade's Office Answering Machine, April 2, 1981

3:42 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.
I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting,
you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The
number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you

want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Roger, this is John, your old Central Falls safari buddy. I'm calling at quarter of four in the morning, April 2nd. I won't be in today. I've just finished the most incredible fucking book of my life. Holy God, boss, I feel like someone put my brain on a damn rocket sled. We need to be extremely clever about this—the book needs hardcover pub, a real all-the-bells-andwhistles launch, and as you know, Apex has no hardcover house. Like most companies that get into the book biz, they don't have a clue. But we better. We just better have a damn clue. Who do you know at the better hardcover houses? And who do you trust? If we lose the paperback rights to this in the course of getting Saltworthy a hardcover publisher, I'll kill myself. I

3:45 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.
I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting,
you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The
number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you
want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Motormouth John, even on the goddam answering machine, right, Roger? I can't even remember what I was talking about. I'm just giddy. I'm going to bed. I don't know if

I can get to sleep or not. If I can't, maybe I'll come in to work, anyway. Probably in my fucking pajamas! [Laughter] If

not, I'll do a Manuscript Report first thing on Friday, okay? Please don't let us fuck this up, Roger. Please. Okay, I'm going to bed.

3:48 A.M.: Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.
I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting,
you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The
number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you
want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

Jesus, Roger. Wait til you read this fucker. Just you wait.

3:50 A.M. Hello, you have reached Roger Wade at Zenith House.
I can't take your call right now. If this is about billing or accounting,
you need to call Andrew Lang at Apex Corporation of America. The

number is 212-555-9191. Ask for the Publishing Division. If you want to leave a message for me, wait for the beep. Thanks.

If anyone does anything to that plant, they're going to die. You got that? They will fucking...die.

ZENITH HOUSE MANUSCRIPT REPORT

EDITOR: John Kenton
DATE: April 3, 1981
MANUSCRIPT TITLE: Last Survivor
AUTHOR'S NAME: James Saltworthy
FICTION/NONFICTION: F
ILLUSTRATIONS: N
AGENT: None
RIGHTS OFFERED: Author offers North American but doesn't know what he's talking about, so TBD
SUMMARY: This novel is set in the year 1982, but was originally written in 1977. To keep to the writer's intention, the time would have to be changed to at least 1986, 1987, or five years from time of pub.

The basic premise is unique and exciting. A network fading in the ratings (auth calls it UBA, United Broadcasting of America, but it feels like CBS) comes up with a unique game show idea. Twenty-six people are stranded on a desert island, where they must survive for six months. Three trained camera operators are among the contestants. In fact each contestant has a "job" on the island, and the camera operators have to train several contestants in use of the equipment. Other contestants are "farmers," "fishers," "hunters," and so on. The idea is that each week for twenty-six weeks, the contestants as a group must vote one person off the island and into exile. First exile gets one dollar for his trouble. The second gets ten. The third gets one hundred. The fourth gets five hundred. And the last survivor gets a

cool million. I know this idea sounds wonky, but Saltworthy actually makes us believe that such a program might find its way onto the air someday, if a network was desperate enough for ratings (and tasteless enough, but on network TV that has never been a problem).

What makes the story brilliant is Saltworthy's delineation of character. TV viewers see the contestants in very simple ways—the Good Young Mother, the Cheerful Athlete, the Rugged Old Fellow, the Tough But Religious Widow. Underneath, however, they are extremely complex. And one of them, a personable young truck driver named Tracy Nordstrom, is actually a dangerous psychopath who will do anything to win the million dollars. In one breathlessly orchestrated scene early in the book, he induces food-poisoning in the Rugged Old Fellow, substituting hallucinogenic mushrooms for the harmless ones gathered by one of the farmers, a sweet exhippie who is heartbroken by her perceived mistake and actually attempts suicide (which the network covers up, as Last Survivor has become a monster hit). Ironically, Nordstrom is the most liked contestant, both by the others on the island and by the huge TV audience. (Saltworthy actually made this reader believe such a show could become a national obsession.)

Only one person, Sally Stamos (the Good Young Mother), suspects how evil Tracy Nordstrom really is. Eventually Nordstrom realizes she's onto him, and sets out to silence her. Will Sally be able to convince the others what's happening? Will she ever get back to her kids?

Saltworthy builds suspense like an old pro, and I simply couldn't put the book down...or turn the pages fast enough. The novel climaxes with a huge storm that accomplishes what until then has just been a cynical TV illusion: the contestants are cut off from everything, real castaways instead of pretend ones. What we've got here is a high concept hybrid between And Then There Were None and Lord of the Flies. I don't want to put the conclusion in this

summary; it needs to be read and savored in the author's own vivid prose. Let me just say that it is so shocking that all the editors who have read it so far have dropped the book like a hot potato. But it works, and I think an American reading public that could accept the supernatural horrors of Rosemary's Baby and the criminous ones of The Godfather will embrace it, recommend it to their friends, and talk about it for years.

EDITORIAL RECOMMENDATION: We've got to publish this. It's the best and most commercial unpublished novel it has ever been my pleasure to read. If ever there was a book that could put a publisher on the map, this is the one. John Kenton

from **THE SAKRED BOO K O F C ARLOS**

SAKRED MONTH OFAPRA (Entry #77)

Time has almost come. Stars and planets almost right, praise Demeter.

GOOD, as my own time is short. The traitor bitch Barfield disposed of,

spell worked and plane went down. No problem there, praise Abbalah,

but in the end she double-crossed me just the same. Thieving bitch took

my Talisman (it was an Owl's Beak actually). I have looked everywhere

but my Beak is gone. I bet she had it in her pocket when the plane went

down. Burned! Nothing but ASHES!! With my Protection gone, my

Time is short. Never mind, am tired of being Carlos anyway. Time for

next stage but first will rid myself of Poop-Shit Kenton. I'll teach you what

rejection REALLY MEANS, you Judas! Let plant take care of rest

of them when the Innocent Blood comes.

I have been all around the neighborhood where Kenton works. All

office buildings except for small market across the street. Crazy old Bum

outside. Woman with a Guitar. Plays almost as bad as Poop-Shit

Kenton edits books. Ha! Thought of using her, Innocent Blood, but also

Crazy, so no good. "You can't work wood if the wood won't work" as

Mr. Keen used to tell me. Wise Man in his way.

A few other "regulars" on the street it looks like. One fellow selling

watches and etc. at a folding table. No problem but weekend would be

best. I'll find a way to get inside, best would be to follow someone who's

"pulling a little overtime." I'll sneak upstairs to their offices and just "lie

low" as they say until Monday morning. Plan to cut Poop-Shit Kenton's

throat myself with Sakred Sacrifice Knife. Take his heart if poss. When

his blood flows down my hands I can die happy, praise Abbalah, praise

Demeter. Only no death! Only move on to next level of existence.

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

SAKRED MONTH OF APRA (Entry #78)

Must beware of one thing. I am still having dreams of "The

General." Who is "The General." Why does he think about supposi

tories. Why does he think of Designated Juice. What is Designated

Juice. Perhaps a holy drink like gooseberry bane or nutmeg milk. I don't

know. Sense danger. Meantime have found a cheap hotel about 3 blocks

from Z.H. Cannot hang around any longer. 1. Might attract wrong

attention. 2. Can no longer stand Guitar-playing Woman Bum.

Someone ought to wrap her guitar around her neck. Boy she plays like

Shit. Maybe it's John Kenton in disguise! Haaaa haaaaa haaaa.

Weekend almost here. Trials & tribs almost over. Kenton you will

pay for rejecting my book and then sikking the Police on me you Crap

Head.

Who is "The General." Who can he be.

Never mind. Weekend almost here.

COME GREEN!

From Sandra Jackson's Journal

April 3 1981 I haven't kept a journal since I was an eleven-year-old girl with mosquitobumps for breasts and a love-life that consisted of moaning over Paul Newman and Robert Redford with my friends Elaine and Phyllis, but here goes. I'm going to skip writing about the plant, as I'm sure John and Roger will have covered that pretty completely (having read a few of John's memos, probably TOO completely). A lot of what I DO have to say, at least in this entry, is of a personal nature, not to say of a sexual nature. I am no longer that little girl, you see! I thought long and hard about whether I should write this down, and finally I decided "why not!" It will probably never be seen by anyone but me anyway, and even if it is, so what? Am I supposed to be ashamed of my sexuality in general, or my attraction to the killingly handsome Riddley Walker in particular? I think neither. I am a modern woman, hear me roar, and see no reason to be ashamed of a. my intellect b. my workplace ambitions (which go a lot higher than the shithole known as Zenith House, believe-youme) or c. my sexuality. I'm not afraid of my sexuality, you see—not to talk about it, and certainly not to let it out for the more-than-occasional walk in the park. I said as much to Herb Porter when he confronted me yesterday. Just thinking about it makes me mad (it also makes me laugh, I'm relieved to say). As if he had the RIGHT to confront me. Me Tarzan, you Jane, this chastity belt.

Herb came into my office around quarter of ten without so much as a byyour-leave, closed the door, and just stood there glowering at me.

"Come on in, Herb," said I, "and why don't you close the door so we can talk in private."

Not so much as a hint of a smile. He just went on glowering. I think I was supposed to be terrified. Certainly Herb Porter is big enough to terrify; he must stand six-one and weigh two hundred and fifty, and given his high color (he was as red as the side of a fire truck yesterday morning, and I'm not exaggerating one little bit), I worry about his blood pressure and his heart. He also talks big, but I was around when the hate-mail started coming in from General Hecksler, and those letters made Herb small in a hurry. The way he looked on Wednesday, actually, when John suggested that, all evidence to the contrary, General Hecksler STILL might not be dead.

"You've been screwing Riddley," Herb said. This was probably supposed to come out sounding like the accusation of an Old Testament prophet, but it emerged in an unimpressive dry squawk. He was still standing just inside the door, his hands opening and closing. With his green leisure suit and red face, he looked like an advertisement for Christmas in hell. "You've been screwing the goddamned JANITOR!"

Last week that might have put me off my stride, but things around here have changed since last week. I think the New Order will take some getting used to. What I'm talking about is TELEPATHY, my dear little journal. Of course. ESP. Absolutely. MIND READING. No doubt about it. In other words, I knew what was on Herb's mind from the moment he stepped through my door, and that pretty well did away with the shock value.

"Why don't you say the rest of it?" I asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Going into that patented Herb Porter bluster of his.

"Yeah, you do," I said. "That I'm fucking the janitor bothers you a lot less than the fact I'm fucking the BLACK janitor. The HANDSOME black janitor."

From the first *fuck*. I had him on the run. I should be ashamed to tell you how much I enjoyed it, but I'm not.

"The fact is, Herbert," said I, "he's hung like a stallion. Such equipment is not the sole property of black men, racist canards to the contrary, but few men, white *or* black, know how to use what God and genetics have given them. Riddley does. And he's livened up many a dull day in this dump, believe me."

"You can't . . . I won't . . . he isn't . . . " Then he just spluttered. But, thanks, to the aforementioned New Order at good old Zenith House, there are no more ellipses around here. For better or worse, every thought is finished. What I could not hear with my ears I could hear in my mind.

You can't . . . DO THIS!

I won't . . . ALLOW IT!

He isn't . . . OUR KIND OF PERSON!

As if Herb Porter, the Ranting Republican, was MY type of person. (He is, of course, in some important ways: a. he's an editor b. he loves books c. he is sharing the bizarre experience of Life With Ivy.)

"Herb," I said.

"What if you catch a disease?" expostulated Herb. "What if he talks about
you to his friends, when they're sitting on their stoops and drinking their GIQs?"

"Herb," I said.

"What if he's got a drug habit? Friends who are criminals? What if . . . "

And there was something sweet at the end of that ellipsis, something that made my heart melt a little. For a racist blowhard Republican, Herb Porter really isn't a bad guy.

What if . . . HE'S MEAN TO YOU?

That was how the last ellipsis ended, and after that Herb just stood there with his shoulders slumped, looking at me.

"Come here," I said, and patted the chair behind my desk. I had about a billion rotten jokes about dead babies, nympho

nuns, and stupid Europeans to go through ("Polish Public Service Announcement: It's ten o'clock! Do *you* know what time it is?"), but I felt very close to Herb just then. I know how strange that would sound to John, who probably thinks Herb Porter is from another world (Planet Reagan), but Herb isn't. Herb Porter is just one more fucked-up Earthling.

Know what I really think? I think telepathy changes everything.

Simply EVERYTHING.

"Listen to me," said I. "The first thing is that Riddley is more likely to catch something from me than me from him. He's the healthiest person in this office, that's my guess. Certainly he's in the best shape. The second thing is that he's more like us than you think. He's working on a book. I know because I saw one of his notebooks one day. It was on his desk, and I peeked."

"Impossible!" Herb snapped. "The idea of the JANITOR writing a BOOK . . . especially the janitor in THIS PLACE . . . !"

"The third thing is that I doubt very much if he sits on his stoop, drinking GIQs with his friends. Riddley has a wonderful little apartment in Dobbs Ferry, I had the privilege of being there once, and I don't think they're much for drinking on stoops in that neighborhood."

"I believe Riddley's Dobbs Ferry address is a convenient fiction," said Herb in his most pompous oh-dear-I-seem-to-have-a-stick-up-my-ass voice. "If he took you to a place up there, I doubt like hell it was HIS place. As for the supposed book, how would a novel by Riddley Walker start? 'Come on ovah heah, I'se gwineter tell y'all a story?'"

An extremely hateful thing to say, but with almost no sting in it. Thanks to Zenith, whose soothing atmosphere now absolutely pervades our offices, I knew that what Herb really felt just then was stunned surprise . . . and, inadequacy. I think that his subconscious mind has been aware for a long time that there's more to Riddley than

meets the eye. I also have reason to believe that Herb and inadequacy go together like a horse and carriage, as the song says. At least until yesterday. That's the part I'm getting to.

"The last thing is this," said I (as gently as I could). "If Riddley is mean to me, I will have to deal with it. And I can. I have before. I'm not a child, Herb. I'm a grown woman." And then I added: "I also know that you've been coming in here when I'm elsewhere and sniffing the seat of my chair. I really think that ought to stop, don't you?"

All the color fell out of his face, and for one moment I thought he was going to faint. I have an idea the telepathy may have saved him. Just as I knew what he'd come in to accuse me of, *he* knew—if only a few seconds in advance—that I'm now aware of his little hobby. So what I said didn't come to him out of a *completely* clear blue sky.

He started to puff up again, a little of the color came back into his face . . . and then he just wilted. It made me feel bad for him. When guys like Herb Porter wilt, they are not a pretty sight. Think jellyfish washed up on the beach.

"I'm sorry," he said, and turned to go. "I'm very sorry. I've known for some time that I have . . . certain problems. I suppose it's time for me to seek professional help. I'll stay out of your way as much as possible in the meantime, and I'd thank you to stay out of mine."

"Herb," said I.

He had one hand on the doorknob. He didn't leave, but he didn't turn around, either. I sensed both hope and dread. God knows what he sensed coming from me.

"Herb," said I once more.

Nothing. Poor Herb just standing there with his shoulders hunched almost up to his ears and me knowing he was trying his hardest not to cry. People who make their living reading and writing are a lot of things, but immune to shame is not one of them.

"Turn around," said I.

Herb stood as he was a moment longer, gathering himself for the ordeal, and then he did as I asked. Instead of being flushed or pale all over his face, he had popped three spots as bright as rouge, one in each cheek and another running across his forehead in a thick line.

"We've got a lot of work to do around here," said I, "and it won't help to have this between us." I was speaking in my calmest, most reasonable voice, but I would be lying if I didn't say I also felt a pleasantly nasty tickle of excitement in my stomach. I have a pretty good idea of what Riddley thinks of me, and while he's not entirely right, he's not entirely wrong, either; I admit to certain rather low tastes. Well, so what? Some people eat tripe for breakfast. And all I can do here is stick to the facts. One of them is this: something about Sandra Georgette Jackson turned Herb on enough to inspire a number of covert seat-sniffing expeditions. And that has turned *me* on. Until yesterday I never thought of myself as the Eula Varner type, but . . .

"What are you talking about?" asked Herb gruffly, but those spots of red were spreading, flushing away his pallor. He knew perfectly well what I was talking about. We might as well have been wearing signs around our necks reading CAUTION! TELEPATHY AT WORK!

"I think we need to get beyond this," said I. "That's what I'm talking about. If having it off with me will do that, then I'm willing."

"Sort of like taking one for the team, eh?" said he. He was trying to sound nasty and sarcastic, but I wasn't fooled. And he *knew* I wasn't fooled.

All sort of delightful, in a weird way.

"Call it whatcha wanna," said I, "but if you're reading my mind as clearly as I'm reading yours, you know that's not all. I'm . . . let's say I'm interested. Feeling adventurous."

Still trying to be nasty, Herb said, "Let's say you have certain appetites, shall we? Playing truck-driver and

hitchhiker with Riddley, for one. Boffing loudmouth co-worker Herb Porter, for another."

"Herb," said I, "do you want to stand there talking for the rest of the day, or do you want to do something?"

"It just so happens I have a certain problem," said Herb. He was nibbling away at his lower lip, and I saw he was breaking out in a sweat. I was enchanted. Is that terribly mean, do you think? "This is a problem that affects men of all ages and all walks of life. It—"

"Is it bigger than a breadbox, Herb?" said she in her best coy tone.

"Joke about it all you want," said Herb morosely. "Women can, because they just have to lie there and take it. Hemingway was right about that much"

"Yeah, when it comes to Limpdick Disease, a fair number of literary scholars seem to believe that Papa wrote the book," said she, now in her best nasty tone. Herb, however, paid no attention. I don't suppose he'd ever talked about impotency in his entire life (Real Men don't), and here it was, out of the closet and all dressed up for a night on the town.

"This little problem, which so many women seem to think is funny, has all but ruined my life," said Herb. "It wrecked my marriage, for one thing."

I thought, *I didn't know you were married*, and his thought came back right away, filling my head for just a moment: *It was a long time before I ended up in this shithole.*

We stared at each other, big-eyed.

"Wow," said he.

"Yeah," said she. "Go on, Herb. And while I can't speak for all women, this one has never laughed at impotency in her life."

Herb went on, a little more subdued. "Lisa left me when I was twentyfour, because I couldn't satisfy her as a woman. I never hated her for it; she gave it her best for two years.

Couldn't have been easy. Since then, I think I've managed it . . . you know, *it* . . . maybe three times."

I thought about this and my mind boggled. Herb claims to be forty-three, but thanks to our ivy-induced ESP, I know he's forty-eight. His wife left him in search of greener pastures (and stiffer penises) half a lifetime ago. If he's only had successful sexual relations three times since then, that means he's gotten laid once every time Neptune circles the sun. Dear, dear, dear.

"There's a good medical reason for this," said he, with great earnestness. "From the age of ten to the age of fifteen—my sexually formative years—I was a paperboy, and—"

"Being a paperboy made you impotent?" I asked.

"Would you be quiet a minute?"

I mimed running a zipper shut across my lips and settled back in my chair. I like a good story as well as anyone; I just haven't seen many at Zenith House.

"I had a three-speed Raleigh bike," Herb said. "At first it was all right, and then one day while it was parked behind the school, some asshole came along and knocked off the seat." Herb paused dramatically. "That asshole ruined my life."

Do tell, I thought.

"Although," continued Herb, "my cheapskate father must also bear part of the blame."

Plenty of blame to go around, thought I. E*veryone gets a helping but you.*

"I heard that," he said sharply.

"I'm sure you did," said I. "Just go on with your story."

"The bike was obviously ruined, but would that cheapskate get me a new one?"

"No," I said. "Instead of a new bike, the cheapskate got you a new seat."

"That's right," said Herb., by this point too deep into his own narrative to realize I was stealing all of his best lines right out of his head. The truth is, Herb has been telling

himself this story for a lot of years. For him, *My Dad Wrecked My Sex Life* is right up there with T*he Democrats Ruined the Economy* and *Let's Fry the Addicts and End America's Drug Problem*. "Only the bike-store didn't have a Raleigh seat, and could my father wait for one? Oh no. I had papers to deliver. Also, the no-brand seat the guy showed him was ten bucks cheaper than the replacement Raleigh seat in the catalogue. Of course it was also a lot *smaller*. In fact, it was a *pygmy* bicycle seat. This little vinyl-covered triangle that shoved right up . . . well . . . "

"Up *there,"* I said, wanting to be helpful (also wanting to get back to work at some point before July Fourth).

"That's right," he said. "Up *there*. For almost five years I rode all over Danbury, Connecticut with that goddamn pygmy bicycle seat pushing up into the most delicate region of a young boy's body. And look at me now." Herb raised his arms and then dropped them, as if to indicate what a pitiful, wasted creature he has become. Which is quite funny, when you consider the size of him. "These days my idea of a meaningful physical experience with a woman is going down to The Landing Strip, where I might stuff a five dollar bill into some girl's g-string."

"Herb," I said. "Do you get a hardon when you do that?"

He drew himself up, and I saw an interesting thing: Herb had a pretty damned good one right *then*. Hubba, hubba!

"That's a damned personal question, Sandra," said he in a grave and heavy tone of voice. "Pretty gosh-damn personal."

"Do you get a hardon when you masturbate?"

"Let me tell you a little secret," he said. "There are basketball players who can shoot it from downtown all over the court, nothing but net until practice is over and the buzzer goes off. Then every toss is a brick."

"Herb," said I, "let me tell *you* a little secret. The bicycle seat story has been around since bicycles were invented. Before that it was the mumps, or maybe a cross-eyed look from the village witch. And I don't need telepathy to know

the answer to the questions I've been asking. I've got eyes." And I dropped them to the area just below his belt. By then it looked like he had a pretty good-sized socket wrench hidden down there.

"Doesn't last," said he, and right then he looked so sad that I felt sad. Men are fragile creatures, when you get right down to it, the real animals in the glass menagerie. "Once the action starts, Mr. Johnson likes life a lot better in the rear echelon. Where nobody stands at attention and nobody salutes."

"You're caught in a Catch-22," said I. "All men suffering from chronic impotency are. You can't get it up because you're afraid you won't be able to, and you're afraid you won't be able to because—"

"Thank you, Betty Freidan," said Herb. "It just so happens that there are a great many physical causes of impotency. Some day there'll probably be a pill that will take care of the problem."

"Some day there'll probably be Holiday Inns on the moon," I said. "In the meantime, how would you like to do something a bit more interesting than sniffing the seat of my office chair?"

He looked at me unhappily. "Sandra," said he, with no trace of his usual bluster, "I can't. I just can't. I've done this enough—*tried* to do this enough, I should say—to know what happens."

Inspiration struck then . . . although I don't entirely believe I can take credit for it. Things have changed here. I never thought I'd be glad to get to the office, but I think that for the rest of this year I'll just about race into my clothes so I can get here early. Because things have changed. Lights have come on in my head (other places, as well) that I never even *suspected* until now.

"Herb," said I. "I want you to go down to Riddley's cubby. I want you to stand there and look at the plant. Most of all, I want you to take four or five really deep breaths—pull them

all the way down to the bottom of your lungs. Really smell those good smells. And then come right back here."

He looked uneasily out through the window in my door. John and Bill were out there, talking in the hall. Bill saw Herb and gave him a little wave.

"Sandra, if we were to have sex, I hardly think your office would be a viable—"

"You let me worry about that," I said. "Just go on up there and take a few deep breaths. Then come on back. Will you do that?"

He thought about it, then nodded reluctantly. He started to open the door, then looked back at me. "I appreciate you bothering with me," said he, "especially when I was giving you such a hard time. I just wanted to tell you that."

I thought of telling him that altruism does not form a large part of Sandra Jackson's makeup—my motor was revving pretty hard by then—and decided he probably knew that.

"Just go on," I said. "We don't have all day."

When he was gone, I took out my pad and scribbled a note on it: "The ladies' room on six is usually deserted at this time of day. I expect to be there for the next twenty minutes or so with my skirt up and my knickers down. A man of stout heart (or stout *something*) might join me." I paused, then added: "A man of moderate intelligence as well as stout heart might toss this note in the wastebasket before leaving for the sixth floor."

I went up to six, where the ladies' is almost *always* deserted (it has crossed my mind that perhaps there are currently no female employees on that floor of 490 Park Avenue South), went into the stall at the end, and removed certain garments. Then I waited, not sure what might happen next. And I mean that. Whatever telepathy there may be in the fifth-floor offices of Zenith House, its effective range is even shorter than that of a college FM radio station.

Five minutes went by, then seven. I'd made up my mind that he wasn't coming, and then the door squeaked open and a very cautious, very unPorterly voice whispered, "Sandra?"

"Trot down here to the end," said I, "and make it quick."

He came down and opened the stall door. To say he looked excited would be an understatement. And he no longer looked as if he had a socketwrench stuffed down the front of his pants. By then it looked more like a goodsized Craftsman hammer.

"Gee," said I, reaching out to touch him, "I guess maybe the effect of that bicycle seat finally wore off."

He started fumbling at his belt. It kept sliding through his fingers. It was sort of funny, but also very sweet. I pushed his hands away and did it myself.

"Quick," he panted. "Oh, quick. Before it goes away."

"This guy isn't going anywhere," said I, although I did actually have a certain short-term storage site in mind. "Relax."

"It was the plant," he said. "The smell . . . oh my God, the smell . . . musky and *dark*, somehow . . . the way I'd always imagined the fields would smell in that county Faulkner wrote about, the one with the name no one can pronounce . . . oh Sandra, good Christ, I feel like I could *pole-vault* on this thing!"

"Shut up and change places with me," I said. "You sit down and then I'll—"

"To the devil with that," he said, and lifted me up. He's strong—a lot stronger than I ever would have guessed—and almost before I knew what was happening, we were off to the races.

As races of this sort go, it was neither the longest nor the fastest in which I have ever run, but it wasn't bad, especially considering that Herb Porter was last laid around the time Nixon resigned, if he was telling me the truth. When he finally set me down, there were tears on his cheeks. Plus

there's this: before leaving he a. thanked me and b. kissed me. I don't subscribe to many of the romantic ideals, I'm more of a Dorothy Parker type ("good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere"), but sweet is nice. The man who left ahead of me (pausing at the door and checking both ways before going out) seemed a lot different from the man who came stalking into my office with a load in his balls and a chip on his shoulder. That's the kind of judgement only time can confirm, and I know very well that men after sex usually turn into exactly the same men they were before sex, but I have hopes for Herb. And I never wanted to change his life; all I wanted was to clear away as much of the crap between us as I could, so we can work as a team. I never knew how much I wanted this job until this week. How much I wanted to make a *success* of this job. If blowing all four of those guys in Times Square at high noon would help that happen, I'd run out to Game Day on 53rd and buy myself a pair of kneepads.

Spent the rest of the day working on the joke book. How foul in concept, how scabrous in execution…and what a success it is going to be in an America that still longs for the death penalty and secretly believes (not everyone, but a goodly number of citizens, I'd bet) that Hitler had the right idea about eugenics. There is no shortage of these nasty, mean-spirited boogers, but the weird thing is how many I'm making up on my own.

What's red and white and has trouble turning corners? A baby with a javelin through its head.

What's small, brown, and spits? A baby in a frypan.

Little girl wakes up in the hospital and says, "Doctor! I can't feel my legs!" Doctor replies, "That's normal in cases where we have to amputate the arms."

I am grossed out by my own inventiveness. Question is, *is* it mine? Or am I getting these ideas from the same place Herb Porter got his new lease on sexual life?

Never mind. Weekend's almost here. Supposed to be warm, and if so I'm going to Cony Island with my favorite niece, our yearly rite of spring. A couple of days away from this place may help to put all questions in perspective. And Riddley's due back next week. I'll be hoping to comfort him in his time of sorrow as much as possible.

Keeping a journal reminds me of what old Doc Henries used to say after he gave me a tetanus shot when I was ten: "There, Sandra, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Not at all. Not at all.

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE 4/3/81
MESSAGE: I've made two calls since reading your Ms. Report. The first was to that astute business lad and all around prince of a guy, Harlow Enders. I lofted a trial balloon concerning a Zenith House hardcover, and despite dredging up a phrase which I thought would appeal to his presumed imagination (if you're wondering, it was "Event Publishing"), he shot it down at once. His stated reason is there is no h'cover infrastructure either at Zenith or in the larger world of Apex Corporation, but we both know better. The real issue is lack of confidence. All right, okay, fine.

Second call was to Alan Williams, a senior editor at Viking Press. Williams is one of the best in the business, and save your nasty ("Then how do *you* know him?") question. The answer is, from The New York Health Club racquetball tournament, where the gods of chance paired us three years ago. We have played off and on ever since. Alan says that if the Saltworthy is as good as you say it is, that we can probably swing a soft-to-hard deal, with Viking doing the h'cover and Zenith the pb. I know it isn't precisely what we wanted, John, but think of it this way: did you ever in your life believe there might come a day when *we* would be doing the pb edition of a Viking Press book? Little Zenith? And as for the cynical Mr. Saltworthy, I think you could say his luck has changed with a vengeance. We might have been able to swing $20,000, and that much only if we'd been able to get Enders enthusiastically on board. With Viking as a partner, we may be able to score this guy a $100,000 advance. That's my salary for almost four years.

Williams wants to see the ms. ASAP. You should take a copy over to their offices on Madison Avenue yourself. Put on a title page that says something like LAST SEASON, by John Oceanby. Sorry about the cloak and dagger, but Williams thinks it's necessary, and so do I.

Roger

PS: Make me a copy that I can take home and read over the weekend, would you?

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: "LAST SEASON," by "John Oceanby"

Are you saying you set all this in motion without reading the book? That takes my breath away.

John

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE: 4/3/81
MESSAGE: You're my guy, John. We may have had our differences from time to time, but I've never doubted your editorial judgement for a single moment. If you say this is the one, this is the one. On that score, the ivy makes no difference. You're my guy. And while I probably don't need to tell you this, I will: no contact with James Saltworthy until we hear from Alan Williams. Okay?

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: John
RE: Vote of confidence
To say I'm touched by your confidence in me doesn't go far enough, boss. Especially after the Detweiller fuck-up. Fact is, I'm sitting here at my desk and damned near blubbering on my blotter. All will be as you say. My lips are sealed.

John

PS: You do know, don't you, that Saltworthy must have already sent the book to Viking?

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: John DATE: 4/3/81
MESSAGE: First, no blubbering on the blotter—blotters cost money, and as you know, all expenses must now be forwarded to the parent company on a week by week basis (if we needed another sign that The End Is Near, surely that's it). Blubber in your wastebasket…or go on down to Riddley's former quarters and water the plant with your grateful tears.

(Yes, I know perfectly well that no one is paying the slightest attention to my strong recommendation that we all stay clear of the ivy. I could put it in writing, I suppose, but it would just be a waste of ink. Especially since I've been down

there a time or two myself, breathing deep and drawing inspiration.)

Second, how can you call the Detweiller business a fuck-up, considering how it has turned out? Harlow Enders and Apex may not know we're ready to turn the corner into a glorious future, *but we do!*

Third, Alan Williams checked the files over there. *Last Survivor* was supposedly read (or scanned, or perhaps just shifted from the envelope it came in to the one it went back in) and rejected in November of 1978. The editor who signed off on it was one George Flynn, who left publishing to set up his own job-printing business in Brooklyn about a year ago. According to AW, and I quote, "George Flynn had the editorial antennae of a rutabaga."

Fourth, don't give the ms. to LaShonda. Make the copies yourself, *and remember the false title page.*

Fifth (I'm *ready* for a fifth, believe me), please no more memos until at least afternoon. I know I said "everything in writing" from here on out, but my head is starting to ache. I have one from Bill I haven't even looked at.

Roger

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

TO: Roger
FROM: Bill Gelb
RE: Possible Bestseller

You asked for ideas, and I've had what might be a doozy, boss. I went over to Smiler's earlier in the day (warning: that idiotic woman with the guitar is still in front—if she gets picked up and institutionalized, I hope the judge sends her to music school) and checked out their paperback rack. It's a pretty good one (i.e., lots of Pocket Books, Signets, Avons, Bantams, no Zenith Houses except for one dusty Windhover that was published 2 years ago). I counted five so-called nonfiction books about aliens and/or flying saucers, and *six* on investing in the Reagan Era stock market. My idea is suppose we combined the two?

The core concept is this: a stockbroker is abducted by little gray men who first read his brainwaves, suck blood from his nasal cavities, and probe his anus — standard stuff, in other words, been-there done-that. But then, to make up for the inconvenience, they give him stock tips based on their certain market knowledge, obtained in faster-than-light trips to the future. Most of it would be zen stuff like "Never fill your barrow with old bricks" and "Ancient stars offer the best navigation." This crap would, however, be spiced with more practical advice like "Never sell short in a bull market" and "In the long run, power and light stocks always rise." We could call it *Alien Investing*. I know that at first blush the idea sounds crazy, but who would have figured a breakout bestseller called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?*

I even have a writer in mind — Dawson Postlewaite, aka Nick Hardaway, the Macho Man himself. The stock market is Dawson's hobby (fuck, it's his mania, what keeps him poor and thus in our stable) and I think he'd almost do it gratis.

What do you think? And feel free to tell me I'm nuts, if that's what you think.

Bill

from the office of the editor-in-chief

TO: Bill Gelb DATE: 4/3/81

MESSAGE: I don't think you're nuts. No more so than the rest of us, anyway. And it's a great title, almost a guaranteed pick-it-up-andtake-a-look on a rack of paperbacks. *Alien Investing* is hereby greenlit. On the cover I see a photo of the Stock Exchange with a space alien laid in, shooting cosmic rays (green, like the color of money) from his big black eyes. Get Postlewaite on it at once. I know he's got a deadline on *Fresno Firestorm*, but I'll see he gets the necessary extension.

R.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT!

Caller Riddley Walker
For Roger Wade
Date April 3rd 1981
Time 12:35 PM
Message He will be back Wednesday or Thursday of next week. Winding up mother's affairs taking longer than he thought, There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister. Asks if you will water plant but not mention to J. Kenton that you are doing it. Says "hoodoo ivy make dat boy pow'ful nervous." Whatever that means.
Message taken by LaShonda
From Roger Wade's Audio Journal, Cassette 1

This is Friday the third of April. Afternoon. Bill Gelb has come up with an idea. It's a dandy, too. I'm not surprised. Given what's happening, brilliance around here is almost a foregone conclusion. When I returned from lunch…with Alan Williams…what a wonderful guy he is, not in the least because he treated at Onde's, a place that would collapse my meager expense account allowance for a month… anyway, when I got back I spied an amusing thing. Bill Gelb was sitting in his office and rolling dice on his desk. He was too absorbed to notice me noticing him. He'd roll, make a notation on one of those mini legal pads, then roll again, then make another notation. Of course we all know he shoots craps with Riddley every chance he gets, but Riddley's in Alabama and won't be back until the middle of next week. So what's this about? Staying in practice? Just can't get enough of dem bones? Some new system? All

gamblers have systems, don't they? Who the hell knows. He's had a great idea…*Alien Investing*, forsooth…and that earns him a little eccentric-editor time.

Herb Porter has been going around all day with a big, silly smile on his chops. He is actually being *nice* to people. What in God's name can that be about? As if I didn't know, nyuck-nyuck-nyuck.

Never mind Bill and Herb. Never mind Sandra's hot thighs, either. I have another and more interesting thing to ponder. There was a pink WHILE YOU WERE OUT slip on my desk when I got back from lunch. Riddley called and LaShonda took the message. He says he won't be back until next Wednesday or so, because winding up his mother's affairs is taking longer than he thought. But that isn't the interesting part. LaShonda has written, and I quote, "There are difficulties with his brother and sister. Mostly sister." Did Riddley actually tell her that? They have never seemed particularly friendly, in fact I've always gotten the idea that LaShonda considers Riddley to be beneath her, maybe because she believes the Amos 'n Andy accent…although that's a little tough to swallow. Mostly I think it's because he comes to work in gray fatigues from Dickey and she always shows up dressed to the nines…some days to the tens.

No, I don't think Riddley exactly *said* anything about having problems with his brother and sister. I think L. just sort of…*knew.* Zenith isn't out in the reception area, so far the garlic seems to be working and it's mostly growing in the other direction…toward the end of the hall and the window that looks out on the airshaft…but its *influence* may have reached the reception area.

I think LaShonda read his mind. Read it over fifteen hundred miles or so of long distance telephone line. And without even knowing it. Maybe I'm wrong but…

No, I'm not wrong.

Because I'm reading *her* mind, and I *know.*

[Five second pause on tape]

Whoo, Jesus.
Jesus Christ, this is big.
This is fucking *big.*

From Bill Gelb's Diary

4/3/81

I'm at my apartment tonight, but am thinking about Paramus, New Jersey, tomorrow night. There's an all-night poker game there on Saturdays, pretty high stakes and connected to the Italian Brotherhood, if you know what I mean. Ginelli's game, or so I've heard (he's the Mafia type who owns Four Fathers, two blocks from here). I've only gone there a couple of times and lost my shirt on both occasions (I paid up, too, you don't fuck with the Italian gentlemen), but I have a feeling that this time things might be different.

Today in my office, after R.W. okayed my book idea (*Alien Investing* is going to sell at least 3 million copies, don't ask me how I know that but I do), I took my dice out of the desk drawer where I keep them and started rolling. At first I was barely paying attention to what I was doing, then I took a closer look and holy shit, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I got out a legal pad and recorded forty straight rolls.

Thirty-four sevens.

Six elevens.

No snake-eyes, no boxcars. Not even a single point.

I tried the same experiment here at home (as soon as I got in through the door, as a matter of fact), not sure it would work because the telepathy doesn't travel much

beyond the fifth floor at 490 Park. The fact is, you can feel it fade each time you go down (or up) in the elevator. It drains away like water draining out of a sink, and it's a sad sensation.

Anyway, tonight, rolling forty times on my kitchen table produced twenty sevens, six elevens, and fourteen "points"—i.e. spot combos adding up to three, four, five, six, eight, nine, and ten. No snake-eyes. No boxcars. The luck isn't quite so strong away from the office, but twenty sevens and six elevens are pretty amazing. More amazing still, I didn't crap out *one single time*, not at 490, not even here at home.

Will I be as successful at five-card stud and jacks or better on the other side of the Hudson?

Only one way to find out, baby. Tomorrow night.

I can hardly believe what's happening, but there isn't the slightest doubt in my mind that it *is* happening. Roger suggested that we stay away from the plant, and what a joke *that* is. Might as well suggest the tide not to turn, or that Harlow Enders not be such an asshole. (Enders is a Robert Goulet fan. All you have to do to know that is to look at him.)

I found myself wandering down toward Riddley's closet once or twice an hour all day long, just to take a big brain-clearing whiff. Sometimes it smells like popcorn (the Nordica Theater, where I copped my first feel…I didn't tell the others that part, but given current conditions I'm sure they must know), sometimes like freshly cut grass, sometimes like Wildroot Crème Oil, which is what I always wanted the barber to put on my hair as the finishing touch when I was but a wee slip of a lad. On several occasions others were there when I arrived, and just before quitting time we all turned up at once, standing side by side and breathing deep, storing up those good aromas—and good ideas, maybe— for the weekend. I suppose we would have looked hilarious to an outsider, like a *New Yorker* cartoon without a caption (would we even need one to be amusing? I think

not), but believe me, there was nothing hilarious about it. Nothing scary, either. It was nice, that's all. Plain old nice.

Is breathing Zenith addictive? I suppose it must be, but it doesn't feel like a harsh, governing addiction ("governing" may be the wrong word, but it's the only one I can think of). Not like the cigarette habit, in other words, or the pot habit. People say pot isn't addictive, but after my junior year at Bates, I know better—that shit almost got me flunked out. But I repeat, this is not like that. I don't seem to miss it when I'm away from it, as I am now (at least not yet). And at work there is the indescribable feeling of being at one with your mates. I don't know if I'd call it telepathy, exactly (Herb and Sandra do, John and Roger seem a little less sure). It's more like singing in harmony, or walking together in a parade, matching strides. (Not marching, though, it doesn't feel that structured.) And although John, Roger, Sandra, and Herb have all gone their separate ways for the weekend and we're all far from the plant, I still feel in touch with them, as if I could reach out and connect if I really wanted to. Or needed to.

The mailroom is now almost completely empty of manuscripts, which is a damned good thing, because it's now almost completely full of Zenith. Z has also overgrown the walls of the corridor, although much more densely in the southerly direction—i.e. toward the rear of the building and the airshaft. Going the other way it has curled its friendly (we assume they're friendly) tendrils around Sandra's door and John's facing hers, but that's as far as it had progressed as of four o'clock this afternoon, when I split. It seems reasonable to assume that the Barfield woman was right about the garlic and the smell—which we mere humans can no longer detect—is slowing it down, at least in that direction. South of the janitor's closet and the mailroom, however, the corridor is well on the way to becoming a jungle path. There's Z all over the walls (it's buried the framed book jacket blow-ups down that way, which is a

great relief), and large hanging bunches of green Z-leaves. It has also produced several dark blue Z-flowers, which have their own pleasant smell. Sort of like burnt wax (a smell I associate with candles in the Halloween jack-o-lanterns of my youth). Never seen flowers growing on an ivy, but what do I know about plants? The answer is not much.

There's a window reinforced with wire mesh overlooking the airshaft, and Z has begun to overgrow this as well, all leaves (and flowers) turned out toward the sun. Herb Porter says he saw one of those leaves snatch up a fly that was crawling over a pane of that window. Madness? Undoubtedly! But: true madness or false? True, I think, which suggests some unpleasant possibilities to go with all those pleasant smells. But I don't want to deal with that this weekend.

Where I want to go this weekend is Paramus.

Maybe with a stop at my local OTB for good measure.

I probably shouldn't say it, but God! This is more fun than Studio 54!

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/4/81
12:35 A.M.
Aboard the Silver Meteor
Question: Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever in his life been so confused, so disheartened, so shaken, so downright sad?

I don't think so.

Has Riddley Pearson Walker ever had a worse week in the twenty-six years of his life?

Absolutely not.

I am aboard Amtrak's Train 36, headed back to Manhattan at least three days early. No one knows I'm coming, but then, who would care? Roger Wade? Kenton, perhaps? My landlord?

I tried for a plane out of B'ham, but no seats available until Sunday. I could not bring myself to stay in Blackwater—or anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line—that long. Hence the train. And so, to the sound of snores all around me, and in spite of the swaying motion of the car on the rails, I write in this diary. I can't sleep. Perhaps I will be able to when I get back to Dobbs Ferry sometime this afternoon, but the afternoon seems an eternity away. I remember the narrative intro to that old TV

show, *The Fugitive.* "Richard Kimball looks out the window and sees only darkness," William Conrad would say each week. He went on, "But in that darkness, Fate moves its huge hand." Will that huge hand move for me? I think not. I fear not. Unless there is fate in John Kenton's ivy, and how can fate—or Fate—reside in such a small and anonymous plant? Crazy idea. God knows what put it in my head.

My reception in Blackwater was warm only from the McDowells— my Uncle Michael and Aunt Olympia. Sister Evelyn, sister Sophie, sister Madeline (always my favorite, which is what makes this hurt so much), and brother Floyd all cold, reserved. Until late Friday afternoon I put that down to the distractions of grief, no more. Certainly we got through the painful rituals of the burial all right. Mama Walker rests beside my father, in the town graveyard. In the *black* section of the town graveyard, for there the rule of segregation holds as firm as ever, not as a matter of law but due to the laws of family custom—unspoken, unwritten, but as strong as tears and love.

Out my window I see a full moon riding serenely in the still-southern sky, a silver dollar pancake of a moon. So my Mama called it, and tonight it has gone full without her. For the first time in sixty-two years it has gone full without her. I sit here writing and feel the tears sliding down my cheeks. Oh Mama, how I weep for you! How yo littlest chile, de one dem white boys used to call little ole blueblack, how dat chile

do weep! Tonight I is a Stephen Foster fiel' nigger fo sho! Yassuh! Mama in de col' col' groun'! Yes ma'am!

Estranged from my sisters and my brother as well. Where will I be buried, I wonder? In what strange ground?

Anyway, it came out. All the bitterness. And the hate? Was it hate I saw in their eyes? In my dear Maddy's eyes? She who used to hold my hand when we went to school, and who used to comfort me when the others teased me and called me blueblack or bluegum or L'il Heinie on account of the time in first grade when my pants fell down? I want to say no and no and no, but my heart denies that no. My heart says it was. My heart says yes and yes and yes.

There was a family gathering at the house this afternoon, the last act of the sadly prosaic drama that began with Mama's heart attack on the 25th. Michael and Olympia were the nominal host and hostess. It began with coffee, but soon the wine was circulating in the parlor and something quite a bit stronger out on the back porch. I didn't see my brother or any of my sisters in the house, so checked the porch. Floyd was there, drinking a little glass of whiskey and "memorating" (Mama's word for reminiscence) with some of her cousins, and Orthina and Gertrude, from her book-circle (both ladies decorous but undoubtedly tiddly), and Jack Hance, Evvie's husband. No sign of Evvie herself, or Sophie, or Madeline.

I went looking for them, worried that they might not be all right. Upstairs, from the room at the end of

the hall where Mama slept alone for the last dozen years since Pop died, I finally heard their voices. There was murmuring; there was also low laughter. I went down there, my footsteps muffled by the thick hall runner, doing a little memorating myself—on Mama's bitter complaints about that thick runner and how it used to show the dirt. Yet she never changed it. How I wish she had. If they had heard me coming—just the simple sound of approaching footfalls—everything might have been different. Not in reality, of course; dislike is dislike, hate is hate, those things are at least quasi-empirical, I know. It is my illusions that I am talking about. The illusions of my family's regard, the illusions of what I myself had always believed they believed: brave Riddley, the Cornell graduate who has taken a series of menial jobs, work for the body while the mind remains free and uncluttered and able to continue work on the Great Book, a kind of fi*n de siecle Invisible Man.* How often I have invoked the spirit of Ralph Ellison! I even dared to write him once, and received a kind, encouraging reply. It hangs framed on the wall of my apartment, over my typewriter. Whether I will be able to continue on after this is anybody's guess... and yet I think I must. Because without the book, what else is there? Why dere's de broomhandle! De can o' Johnson's flo' wax! De squeegee for de windows and de brush for de tawlits! Yassuh!

No, there must be the book. In spite of everything, *because* of everything, there must be this book. In a very real sense, it's all I have left.

All right. Enough crybaby stuff. Let's get down to it.

I've already written here about the reading of my Mama's last will and testament on the day between her wake and her burial, and how Law Tidyman, her lifelong friend, allowed most of it to stand in her own words. It struck me passing strange then (although I did not put it down, being tired and grief-struck, states of remarkable similarity) that Mama would have asked Law to do it, old friend or not, rather than her own son, who is now considered one of the best lawyers of any color, at least on this side of Birmingham. Now perhaps I understand that a little bit better.

In her will, Mama wrote that she wanted "all cash, of which I do have a little, to go to the Blackwater Library Fund. All negotiable items, of which I do have yet a few, should be sold by my executor at top price available within the twelvemonth following my death, and all proceeds donated to the Blackwater High School Scholarship Fund, with the understanding that any such resulting scholarships, which may be called Fortuna Walker Scholarships if the Committee would so honor me, should be given without regard to race or religion, as all during my life I, Fortuna Walker, have believed Whites to be every bit as good as Blacks, and Catholics *almost* as good as Southern Baptists."

How we chuckled at that nearly perfect microcosm of all her wit. But there was no chuckling this afternoon. At least, not after my sisters looked

up from where they sat on her bed and saw me standing shocked in the doorway.

By then I had seen all I needed to see. "Anyone a step over puffick idiot'd know what *that* was about," Mama herself no doubt would have said—more memoration. And what I saw in my dead mother's bedroom will be printed on my memory until memoration itself ceases.

Her dresser drawers were open, all of them. Her things were still in the top ones, although many of her blouses and scarves slopped over the edges, and it was clear that everything had been stirred about and pawed through—a puffick idiot could have seen that. But the things which had been in the two bottom drawers had been pulled out and lay scattered in drifts across her rose-colored rug, the one which had never shown dirt because nothing dirty was allowed in that quiet room. At least not until last evening, that is, when she was dead and unable to stop it. What made it worse, what made them seem to me so much like pirates and plunderers, was the fact that it was her unmentionables lying there. My dead mother's underwear, scattered hell to breakfast by her daughters, who in my eyes made Lear's look kind by comparison.

Am I unkind? Self-righteous? I no longer know. All I know is that my heart hurts and my head is roaring with confusion. And I know what I saw: her drawers opened, her slips and underpants and righteous Playtex girdles spread across the floor. And they on the bed, laughing, with a red tin box on the coverlet

in the middle of their circle; a red box with its Sweetheart Girl cover taken off and laid aside. It had been full of cash and jewelry. Now it was empty and it was their hands that were full of her greenbacks and heirlooms. How much might their trove have been worth? Not a huge amount, but by no means paltry; some of the pins and broaches could have been costume stuff, but I saw two rings whose stones were, according to Mama herself, diamonds. And Mama didn't lie. One of them was her engagement ring.

It was perhaps a minute before they saw me. I said nothing myself; I was literally struck dumb.

Evelyn, the oldest, looking young in spite of the gray in her hair, with her hands full of old tens and fives, put aside by my mother over the years.

Sophie, counting through official-looking papers that might have been stock certificates or perhaps treasury bonds, her fingers speeding along like a bank-teller ready to cash out her drawer for the weekend.

And my youngest sister, Maddy. My schoolyard guardian angel. Sitting with her palms full of pearls (probably cultured, I grant you) and earrings and necklaces, sorting through them, as absorbed as an archeologist. That was what hurt the worst. She hugged me when I got off the plane, and wept against my neck. Now she picked through her dead mother's things, the good stuff and the trumpery, grinning like a jewel thief after a successful heist.

All of them grinning. All of them laughing.

Evvie held up the cash money and said, "There's over eight thousand right here! Won't Jack yell when I tell him! And I bet this isn't all. I bet—"

Then she saw Sophie was no longer looking at her, and no longer smiling. Evvie turned her head, and Madeline did, too. The color left Maddy's cheeks, turning her rich complexion dull.

"And how were you going to split it?" I heard myself ask in a voice that did not sound like my own at all. "Three ways? Or is Floyd in on this, too?"

And from behind me, as if he'd only been waiting for his cue, Floyd himself said: "Floyd's in on it, little brother. Oh yes indeed. Was Floyd told the ladies what that box looked like and where it was apt to be. I saw it last winter. She left it out when she was having one of her spells. But you don't know about her spells, do you?"

I turned, startled. From the smell of the whiskey on Floyd's breath and the dark tinge of red in the corners of his eyes, the tot I'd seen him drinking on the porch hadn't been his first of the day. Or his third, for that matter. He pushed by me into the room, and said to Sophie (always *his* favorite): "Evvie's right—there'll be more. That box is the most of it, I think, but a long way from the all of it."

He turned to me and said, "She was a packrat. That's what she turned into over the last few years. One of the things she turned into, anyhow."

"Her will—" I began.

"Her will, what about it?" Sophie asked. She dropped the papers she'd been studying to the coverlet and made a shooing gesture with her slim

brown hands, as if dismissing the whole subject. "Do you think we had a chance to talk to her about it? She shut us out. Look who she got to draw up her death-letter. Law Tidyman! That old Uncle Tom!"

The contempt with which she spoke struck me deep, not because of the sentiment but because of the simple fact that I'd seen Sophie and Evelyn and Evvie's Jack laughing and talking with Law Tidyman and Law's wife Sulla not half an hour before. Best of friends, they'd looked like.

"You don't know how she got these last few years, Rid," Madeline said. She sat there, her lap all but overflowing with her mother's keepsakes and gracenotes, sat there defending what she was doing —what *they* were doing. "She—"

"I might not know how she *got,"* I said, "but I know pretty damned well what she w*anted.* Wasn't I there with the rest of you when Law read her will? Didn't we all sit around in a circle, like at a goddamned séance? And isn't that what it was, with Mama talking to us from the other side of her grave? Didn't I hear her say in Law Tidyman's voice that she wanted that there—" I pointed to the plunder on the bed. "—to go to the town library and to the high school scholarship fund? In her name, if they'd have it that way?"

My voice was rising, I couldn't help it. Because now Floyd was sitting on the bed with them, one arm around Sophie's shoulders, as if to comfort her. And when Maddy's hand crept into his, he took it the way you take the hand of a frightened child. To comfort her, too. It was them on the bed and me in the

doorway and I saw their eyes and knew they were against me. Even Maddy was against me. *Especially* Maddy, it seems. My schoolyard angel.

"Didn't you see me there, nodding my head because I understood what she wanted? I know I saw you-all nodding the same way. It's now I must be dreaming. Because it can't be that the folks I grew up with down here in this godforsaken map-splat of the world could have turned into graveyard ghouls."

Maddy's face sagged at that and she began to cry. And I was glad I had made her cry. That's how angry I was, how angry I still am when I think of them sitting there in the lamplight. When I think of the tin box with its Sweetheart Girl cover set aside, its insides all turned out. Their hands and laps full of her things. Their *eyes* full of her things. Their hearts, too. Not *her,* but her *things.* Her remainder.

"Oh you self-righteous little *prig,"* Evelyn said. "And weren't you *always*!"

She stood up and swept her hands back along her cheeks, as if to wipe away her tears…but there were no tears in those flaming eyes of hers. Not this evening. This evening I saw my brother and three sisters with their masks laid aside.

"Save your accusations," I said. I have never liked her—regal Evelyn, whose eyes were so firmly fixed on the prize that she never had time for her littlest brother…or for anyone who did not think the stars pretty much changed their courses to watch Evelyn Walker Hance in her enchanted walk through life.

"It's hard to point fingers successfully when your hands
are full of stolen goods. You might drop your loot."

"But she's right," Madeline said. "You *are* self-righteous. You *are* a prig."

"Maddy, how can you say that?" I asked. The others could not have hurt me, I don't think, at least not one by one; only she.

"Because it's true." She let go of Floyd's hand, stood up, and faced me. I don't believe I will ever forget a single word of what she said. More memorating, God help me.

"You were here for the wake, you were here for the reading of a deadletter her own son wasn't good enough to write, you were here for the burying, you were here for the after-burying, and you're here now, looking at things you don't understand and passing a fool's judgement on them because of all the things you don't know. Things that went on while you were up in New York, chasing the Pulitzer Prize with a broom in your hand. Up in New York, playing the nigger and telling yourself whatever different it takes for you to get to sleep at night."

"Amen! Tell it!" Sophie said. Her eyes were blazing, too. They were a demon's eyes, almost. And I? I was silent. Stunned to silence. Filled with that horrible, deathlike emotion that comes when someone finally spills out the home truths. When you finally understand that the person you see in the mirror is not the one others see.

"Where were you when she died, though? Where were you when she had the six or seven little heart

attacks leading up to the big ones? Where were you when she had all those little strokes and got so funny in her head?"

"Oh, he was in New York," Floyd said cheerily. "He was employing his fine arts degree scrubbing floors in some white man's book-publishing office."

"It's research," I said in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I felt all at once as though I might faint. "Research for the book."

"Research, that explains it," Evelyn said with a sage nod, and put the cash money carefully back into the tin box. "That's why she went without lunches for four years in order to pay for your schoolbooks. So you could research the wonderful world of custodial science."

"Oh, ain't you a bitch," I said…just as though I had not written many of those same things about my job at Zenith House, not once but several times, in the pages of this journal.

"Shut up," Maddy said. "Just shut up and listen to me, you self-righteous, judgmental prig." She spoke in a low, furious voice that I had never heard before, had never imagined might come from her. "You, the only one of us not married and with children. The only one with the luxury of seeing family through this…this…I don't know…"

"This golden haze of memory," Floyd suggested. He had a little silver bottle in his pants pocket. He drew it out then and had himself a nip.

Maddy nodded. "You don't have the slightest idea of what we need, do you? Of where we are. Floyd and Sophie have got kids getting ready to go to

college. Evvie's have gone through, and she's got the unpaid bills to prove it. Mine are coming along. Only you—"

"Why not ask Floyd to help you?" I asked her. "Mama wrote me a letter and said he cleared a quarter of a million last year. Don't you see…don't any of you see what this is? This is robbing pennies off a dead woman's eyes! She—"

Floyd stepped up. His eyes were deadly flat. He held up a clenched fist. "You say another word like that, Riddie, and I'm going to break your nose."

There was a moment of tense silence, and then from down below Aunt Olympia called up, her voice high and jolly and nervous. "Boys and girls? Everything all right up there?"

"Fine, Aunt Olly," Evelyn called back. Her voice was light and carefree; her eyes, which never left mine, were murderous. "Talking over the old times. We'll be down in a wink. Y'all stay close, all right?"

"You're sure everything is okay?"

And I, God help me, felt an insane urge to scream: N*o! It's not okay! Get up here! You and Uncle Michael both get up here! Get up here and rescue me! Save me from the pecking of the carrion birds!*

But I kept my mouth shut, and Evvie shut the door.

Sophie said, "Mama wrote you all the time, we knew that, Rid. You were always her favorite, she spoiled you rotten, especially after Pop died and there was no more holding her back. You got plenty of how she saw it."

"That's not true," I said.

"But it is," Maddy said. "And do you know what? The way Mama saw things was pretty selective. She told you about all the money Floyd made last year, I've no doubt of it, but I doubt if she told you about how Floyd's partner stole everything he could get his hands on. Hi-ho, it's Oren Anderson, off to the Bahamas with his chippy of the month."

I felt as if I'd been sucker-punched. I looked at Floyd. "Is that true?"

Floyd took another little nip at the silver flask that had been Pop's before it was his and grinned at me. It was a ghastly grin. His eyes were redder than ever and there was spit on his lips. He looked like a man at the end of a month-long binge. Or at the beginning of one.

"True as can be, little brother," he said. "I was rooked like an amateur. I think I'm going to be able to sail through without getting in the papers, but it's still not a sure thing. I came to her for help and she told me how she was broke. Never got over putting you through Cornell is what she said. How broke does that on the bed look to you, little brother? Eight thousand in cash…at least…and twice that in jewelry. Thirty thousand in stocks, maybe. And she wanted to give it to the *library*." A glare of contempt closed his face like a cramp. "Jesus please us."

I looked to Evvie. "Your husband Jack…the construction business…"

"Jack's had a hard two years," she said. "He's in trouble. Every bank within fifty miles is carrying his paper. How much he owes is all that's propping him up." She laughed, but her eyes were frightened.

"Just something else you didn't know. Sophie's Randall is a little better off—"

"We keep even, but get ahead?" Sophie also laughed. "Not likely. Floyd helped all of us along when he could, but since Oren doublecrossed him…"

"That *snake,"* Maddy said. "That fucking *snake*."

I turned to Floyd, and nodded at the little flask. "Maybe you've been taking a little too much of that. Maybe that's why you didn't mind your business a little better when you had a little more business to mind."

Floyd's fist came slowly up again. This time I stuck out my chin. You get to a point when you just don't care anymore. I know that now.

"Go ahead, Floyd. If it'll make you feel better, go on ahead. And if you think twenty or even forty thousand dollars is going to bail y'all out, then go ahead with that, too. More fools you be."

Floyd drew his fist back. He would have hit me, too, but Maddy stepped between us. She looked at me, and I looked away. I couldn't bear what I saw in her eyes.

"You with the quotes," she said softly. "Always with the quotable quotes. Well, here's one for you, Mr. Uppity: 'He that hath a wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.' Francis Bacon said that almost three hundred years ago, and it was folks like us he was talking about, not folks like you. Not folks that take twenty or thirty thousand dollars to get educated, then have to do research in floor-polishing. How much have you given back to your

family? I'll tell you how much! N*othing!* And *nothing!* And *nothing*!"

She was standing so close and spat each *nothing* so hard that spit flew from her lips to mine.

"Maddy, I—"

"Shut up," she said. "*I'm* talking now."

"Tell it!" Sophie said happily. It was a nightmare, I tell you. A nightmare.

"I'm getting out of here," I said, and started to turn away.

They wouldn't let me. That's like nightmares, too; they won't let you
get away. Evelyn grabbed me on one side, Floyd on the other.

"No," Evvie said, and I could smell booze on her breath, too. The wine they were drinking downstairs. "You listen. For once in your stuckup life, you just listen."

"You weren't here when she got funny, but *we* were," Maddy said. "The strokes she had affected her mind. Sometimes she went wandering, and we had to go find her and bring her back. Once she did it at night and we had half the town out looking for her with flashlights. So far as I could tell, you weren't there when we finally found her at two in the morning, curled up on the riverbank fast asleep with half a dozen fat copperheads down there not four yards from her bare feet. So far as I know, you were up there in your New York apartment when that happened, fast asleep yourself."

"Tell it," Floyd said grimly. All of them acting as though I live in the Dakota, in a penthouse, instead

of my little place in Dobbs Ferry…and yet my little place is nice enough, isn't it? Perfectly affordable, even on a janitor's salary, for a man with no vices and no hostages to fortune.

"Sometimes she messed herself," Maddy said. "Sometimes she talked crazy in church. She'd go to her book-circle and rave half an hour about some book she'd read twenty years ago. She'd be all right for awhile…she had plenty of good days until the last few months…but sooner or later the nutty stuff would start in again, each time a little worse, a little longer. And you didn't know about any of it, did you?"

"How could I?" I asked. "How could I, when none of you wrote and told me? Not so much as a word?"

That was the one shot of mine that went home. Maddy flushed. Sophie and Evvie looked away, saw the treasure scattered on the bed, and then looked away from that, too.

"Would you have come?" Floyd asked quietly. "If we'd written you, Riddie, would you have come?"

"Of course," I said, and heard the terrible stiff falsity in my voice. So, of course, did they…and the moral advantage passed away from me. For tonight, most likely for good, as far as they are concerned. That their own moral stance was at least partly an excuse for reprehensible behavior I do not doubt. But their anger at me was genuine, and at least partly justified—I don't doubt that, either.

"Of course," he said, nodding and grinning his red-eyed grin. "Of *course*."

"We took care of her," Maddy said. "We banded together and we took care of her. There was no hospital and no nursing home, even after she started to wander. After the riverbank adventure I slept here some nights; so did Sophie; so did Evelyn and Floyd. Everyone but you, Rid. And how did she thank us? By leaving us a worthless house and a worthless barn and four acres of nearly worthless land. The things that *were* worth something—money that could pay off the credit cards Floyd uses for his business and give Jack a little more breathing-space—those she denied us. So we took them. And you come in, Mr. Smart Northern Nigger comes in, and tells us we're ghouls stealing the pennies off a dead woman's eyes."

"But Maddy…don't you see that if what you take isn't what she wanted to give, no matter how much of a tight place you're in or how bad you need it, that's stealing? Stealing from your own mother?"

"*My own mother was crazy!"* she cried at me in a whispered shriek. She pistoned her tiny fists in the air, I think expressing her frustration that I should continue to balk over a point that was so clear to her…perhaps because she had been there, she had seen Mama's craziness at its fruitiest, and I had not. "*She lived the last part of her life crazy and she died crazy! That will was crazy!"*

"We *earned* this here," Sophie said, first patting Maddy's back and then drawing her gently away from me, "so never mind your talk about stealing. She tried to give away what was ours. I don't blame her for it, she *was* crazy, but it's not going to stand.

Riddie, you just want to take all your Boy Scout ideas on out of here and let us finish our business."

"That's right," Evvie said. "Go on down and get a glass of wine. If Boy Scouts drink wine, that is. Tell them we'll be down directly."

I looked at Floyd. He nodded, not smiling now. By then none of them were smiling. Smiling was done. "That's it, little brother. And never mind that oh-poor-me look on your face. You stuck your nose in where it didn't belong. If you got bee-stung, it's nobody's fault but your own."

At the last I looked at Maddy. Just hoping. Well, hope in one hand and shit in the other; even a puffick idiot knows how that one turns out.

"Go on," she said. "I can't bear to look at you."

I went back down the stairs like a man in a dream, and when Aunt Olympia laid her hand on my arm and asked what was wrong up there, I smiled and said nothing, we were just talking over old times and got a little hot under the collar. The Southern family at its finest; paging Tennessee Williams. I said I was going into town to get a few things, and when Aunt Olly asked me what things—meaning what had she forgotten when she stocked for Mama's last party—I didn't answer her. I just went on out, marching straight ahead with that meaningless little smile on my face, and got into my rental car. Basically what I've done since is just keep going. I left a few clothes and a paperback book, and they can stay there until the end of the age, as far as it concerns me. And all the while I've been moving I've also been replaying what I saw as I stood unnoticed in her doorway:

drawers pulled out and underwear scattered and them on the bed with their hands full of her things and the cover of her tin box set aside. And everything they said may have been true, or partially true (I think the most convincing lies *are* almost always partially true), but what I remember most clearly is their overheard laughter, which had nothing in it of absconding partners or husbands teetering on the edge of insolvency or credit card bills long past due and stamped with those ugly red-ink warnings. Nothing to do with kids needing money for college, either. The rue count, in other words, was zero. The laughter I overheard was that of pirates or trolls who have found buried treasure and are dividing it up, perchance by the light of a silver dollar pancake moon. I went down the stairs and down the back porch steps and away from that place like a man in a dream, and I am still that dreamer, sitting in a train with ink splattered all the way up my hand to the wrist and several pages of scribbling, probably indecipherable, now behind me. How foolish it is to write, what a pitiful bulwark against this world's hard realities and bitter home truths. How terrible to say, "This is all I have." Everything aches: hand, wrist, arm, head, heart. I am going to close my eyes and try to sleep…at least to doze.

It's Maddy's face that terrifies me. Greed has made her a stranger to me. A terrible stranger, like one of those female monsters in the Greek fairy-tales. No doubt I *am* a prig, just as they said, a self-

righteous prig, but nothing will change what I saw in their eyes when they didn't know I was seeing them.

Nothing.

More than my book, I find it's the simplicities of work that I long for—Kenton's endless self-analysis and agonizing, Gelb's amusing fixation with the dice, Porter's even more amusing fixation with the seat of Sandra Jackson's office chair. I wouldn't even mind having it off with her again, starring in one of her fantasies. I want the simplicity of my janitor's cubby, where all things are known, normal, unsurprising. I want to see if that pitiful little ivy is maintaining its toehold on life.

Around moonset, the Silver Meteor crossed the Mason-Dixon line. My sisters and my brother are on the other side of that line now, and I'm glad.

I can't wait to get back to New York.

Later/8 A.M.

Slept for almost five hours. My neck is stiff and my back feels like a mule kicked me, but on the whole I feel a little better. At least I was able to eat a little breakfast. I thought the idea I woke with might go away in the dining car, but it has remained clear. The idea—the intuition—is that if I were to go into the office instead of switching trains for Dobbs Ferry, I might feel better yet. I feel drawn there. It's as though I had a dream about the place, one I can't quite remember.

Maybe it's the plant—Zenith the ivy. My subconscious telling me to go in and water the poor

little thing before it dies of thirst.

Well…why not?

F R O M T H E D I S P AT C H E S O F I R O N - G U T S H E C K S L E R

Apr 4 81
0600 hrs
Pk Ave So NYC

Zero hour approaching. I plan to make my entry into the Publishing House of Satan across the street in 2-3 hours. "Crazy Guitar Gertie" disguise put away. Respectable businessman in weekend clothes now, HA!

Look out, you Designated Jew. I will be in your office by noon, waiting

On Monday morning your ass is mine.

No more dreams of CARLOS. He may be gone. Good. One less thing to worry about.

from **THE SAKRED BOO K O F C ARLOS**

SAKRED MONTH OFAPRA (Entry #79)

Saturday morning. As soon as I finish this entry, I leave for Zenith

House of Kaka-Poop. Have my "special suitcase" with all sakred sacrifice

knives. They are "plenty sharp," too! I am dressed nice, like a business

man on his Saturday in the city. I should have no problems penetrating

into that house of thiefs and mockers.

Wonder if Kenton got my "little present."

Wonder if he knows what's happening with his girl-friend or should

I say ex girlfriend. Too bad he'll be dead before she can give him anymore

"pussy." Innocent blood! Innocent blood from her if no other first!

Myself I will die a virgin and I am glad.

I hope and expect to be locked away in Kenton's office by noon today.

I have plenty of snacks and two sodas in with my knives and I will be able

to "hold out" until Monday just fine.

No more dreams of "The General" and his Designated Juice. That's

a load off my mind.

And now for you, John Kenton. Betrayer of my dreams, thief of my

book. Why wait for the abbalah to do what I can do myself?

COME DEMETER!

COME GREEN!

E N D O F T H E P L A N T , P A R T F I V E

Following next month’s installment of this story--next month’s very long installment of this story--The Plant will be going back into hibernation so that I can continue work on Black House (the sequel to The Talisman, written in collaboration with Peter Straub). I also need to complete work on two new novels (the first, Dreamcatcher, will be available from Scribner’s next March) and see if I can’t get going on The Dark Tower again. And my agent insists I need to take a breather so that foreign translation and publication of The Plant--also in installments, also on the Net--can catch up with American publication. Yet don’t despair. The last time The Plant furled its leaves, the story remained dormant for nineteen years. If it could survive that, I’m sure it can survive a year or two while I work on other projects.

Part 6 is the most logical stopping point. In a traditional print book, it would be the end of the first long section (which I would probably call “Zenith Rising”). You will find a climax of sorts, and while not all of your questions will be answered--not yet, at least--the fates of several characters will be resolved.

Nastily
Permanently.

As a way of thanking those readers (somewhere between 75 and 80 per cent) who came along for the ride and paid their dues, Part 6 of The Plant will be available free of charge. Enjoy...but don’t relax too much. When The Plant returns, it will once more be on a pay-as-you-go basis.

In the meantime, get ready for Part 6. I think you’re going to be surprised. Perhaps even shocked.

Best regards (and happy holidays), Stephen King

PART VI

E D ITO R’S N OTE

Z is almost certainly the most interesting document in the collection which makes up this story. Although remarkably coherent, the careful reader must certainly detect the work of various voices, most or all of them already encountered in the various memos, letters, and journals presented so far. In addition to this, the discovered manuscript (it would harm the unfolding story to say much about the circumstances of that discovery here) shows many different typefaces and editorial hands. About thirty per cent of it was typed on a portable Olivetti, which can be positively identified as John Kenton’s by the flying d and the distinctive crack running through the capital S. Another thirty per cent is certainly the work of Riddley Walker’s 1948 office-model Underwood, which was found on the desk of his study in Dobbs Ferry. The other typefaces are those produced by the sort of IBM Selectrics then in use at the Zenith House offices. Ten per cent of the manuscript was typed with the IBM type-ball “Script,” which was favored by Sandra Jackson. Twenty per cent of the manuscript is in IBM’s “Courier” format, which was favored by both Herb Porter and Roger Wade. The remaining work is in IBM’s “Letter Gothic,” which can be found on many (although not all) of Bill Gelb’s business letters and in-house memos.

The most interesting thing about this collaboration, which is remarkably uni fied in spite of the stylistic interplay, is the fact that it is told in the third-person omniscient style. Information is conveyed by use of a shifting perspective, and include many incidents at which none of the narrators—Kenton, Wade, Jackson, Gelb, or Walker—were present. The reader may wonder if these passages (several of which are

interwoven below) are informed speculation based on the available evidence, or if they are pure imagination, no more to be believed than the plots of Anthony LaScorbia's "big bug" books. To these possibilities, the editor would first like to remind the reader that there was a sixth participant at Zenith House during those months in 1981, and then to suggest that if what Kenton, Wade, et. al. suspected was true—that the ivy sent to them was telepathic and to some degree manipulative—then perhaps the true narrator of Z was Zenith the common ivy itself (or himself, to use Riddley Walker's most common pronounal reference).

Although insane by all normal standards of deduction, the idea has a certain persuasive charm when taken in context with other events of that year—many verifiable, such as the crash of the commuter plane on which Tina Barfield was a passenger—and offers at least one explanation for the manuscript. The idea that a telepathic ivy plant turned the typewriters of five previously normal editors into Ouija boards is an outrage to rational thought; with that much, no sane person could fail to agree. And yet there is a certain pull to the idea, at least for this reader, a sense that yes, this is how these things happened, and yes, this is how the truth of those days came to be written down.

S. K.

From Z, an unpublished manuscript

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

New York City

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 50 F.

9:16 A.M.

RainBo Soft Drinks has its New York o ffices on the third floor of the building which stands at 490 Park Avenue South. Although small (market share as of 3/1/81: 6.5%), RainBo is enthusiastic, a young and growing concern. In early April of 1981, the RainBo top brass certainly has something to be excited about: they have gotten the rights (for a price they can afford) to commercially exploit the classic Harold Arlen composition “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” They are tooling up a whole new PR campaign around the song.

On this Saturday morning, executive vice president George Patella (“I’m a knee man” is his favorite singles-bar pickup line...not that he is single) has driven in from his home in Westport because a brilliant concept has come to him in the middle of the night. He wants to memo it and lay it on his superior’s desk before noon. And after noon, there’s a certain new tittybar over on 7th Avenue that he’s been meaning to check out.

His head full of animated soda bottles dancing over the rainbow in cunning little red shoes, George Patella barely registers the man who follows him in, catching the door and murmuring “Thank you” after George has used his key. All he notices is an older gentleman, in his late sixties or early seventies, handsome in a haggard sort of way, and wearing a green military uniform.

If asked later to be more speci fic about this uniform, Mr. Patella would be unable to add much, although he is by nature a friendly and helpful man (albeit one with a tendency to put his wedding ring into a rear compartment of his wallet on certain occasions). If his head hadn’t been so full of those dancing soda bottles, he might have seen that the elderly fellow with the steel gray brush-cut wore no insignia and no badges of rank. If chivvied into total recall (or hypnotized into it), Patella might have said this of the man who stepped into the elevator with him that Saturday morning: he was wearing a dark green shirt, a black tie held to the shirt with a plain gold bar, and dark green pants, sharply creased and cuffed, over brightly shined black shoes. An outfit of military aspect, in other words, but one that could have been purchased at the Army-Navy store a block over for a total cost of under forty dollars.

It is the way he wears what he has on that gives the impression of military dress; once the older gentleman has pushed the button for his floor (George Patella has no idea which one), he stands perfectly straight and perfectly still, with his hands clasped in front of him and his eyes on the lighted floor-indicator. He doesn’t fidget or call attention to himself in any way, certainly not by attempting to chat. And there is nothing in his posture which suggests discomfort. This is a man who has stood so—not quite at attention, but certainly not at ease—many times before. His face

communicates that. That, and the idea that he perhaps enjoys such a posture.

All and all no surprise that George Patella, preoccupied with his own concerns (he’s too deep within them to even realize he’s softly whistling “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”), does not question the man’s right to be there. All else aside, the man in the green shirt and trousers radiates that sense of right place-right time. And certainly George Patella does not recognize the man sharing his elevator car as General Anthony “Iron-Guts” Hecksler (U.S. Army Ret.), madman, murderer, and fugitive from justice. Patella gets off on Three to write his memo about the dancing soda bottles. The man in the green pants and shirt stays aboard the elevator car. Patella the soft-drink seller has one last glimpse of the military fella as he (Patella) turns the corner toward the RainBo offices: an elderly gent standing quietly erect, looking straight ahead, hands clasped in front of him, the fingers of those hands slightly bunched by arthritis. Just standing there, just waiting for the elevator to go up, so he can get on with his own business.

Whatever that business might be.

April 4, 1981

Cony Island

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 51 F.

9:40 A.M.

As soon as Sandra Jackson and Dina Andrews step o ff the train, eleven-yearold Dina expresses her desire to go on the Wonder Wheel, which has just resumed operation for another season.

On their way down there, they are huckstered cheerfully from both sides of the mostly empty midway. One cry makes Sandra smile: “Hey, pretty blonde lady! Hey, you little red-headed cutie! Come on over here and try your luck! Make my day!”

Sandra diverts to the Wheel of Chance and sizes the game up. It’s a little like roulette, only with prizes instead of money if you win. Hit red or black, odd or even, and win a small prize. Hit one of the triples and win a bigger one. Hit a four-way and win a bigger one yet. And if you should pick a single number and hit, you win the prize of prizes—the big pink teddy bear. All this possibility for a quarter!

Sandra turns to Dina (who is indeed both a redhead and a cutie). “What are you going to name your new bear?” she asks her.

The guy running the Wheel of Chance grins. “Confidence!” he cries. “Sweetheart, that’s the best thing in life!”

“I’ll name him Rinaldo,” Dina says promptly. “If you win him.”

“Oh, I’ll win him, all right,” Sandra says. She takes a quarter from her purse and surveys the numbers, which run from one to thirty-four and include such ringers as FREE SPIN, BYE-BYE NICE TRY, and double zero. She looks at the concessionaire, who is checking out her bod in a way that is thorough without being creepy. “My friend,” she says to him, “I want you to remember that I’m only putting a floor under

you. From this point, your season is only going to get better.”

“Gosh, you are confident,” he says. “Well, pick your number and I’ll let er rip.”

Sandra lays her quarter down on seventeen. Three minutes later the concessionaire is watching with wide eyes as the pretty lady and her pretty young friend continue to walk down toward the Wonder Wheel, the pretty young friend now in charge of a pink teddy-bear almost as big as she is.

“How’d you do it, Aunt Sandy?” Dina wants to know. She is all but bursting with excitement. “How’d you do it?”

Aunt Sandy taps her forehead and grins. “Psychic waves, sweetheart. Call it that. Come on, let’s see what the world looks like from way up high.”

Sometimes life exhibits (or seems to exhibit) an observable pattern. This is certainly one of those times. Because, as the two of them begin to skip hand in hand toward the Wonder Wheel, Sandra Jackson begins to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and Dina quickly joins in.

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

9:55 A.M.

Gosh and fishes, gee whillikers, and Katie bar the door! What a time old Iron-Guts is having! Talk about making the best of your time! Talk about your gauzy moon-drenched madhouse dreams made real!

At first he felt some doubt. Disquiet, even. For a few moments there, after he picked the lock of the hallway door (no problem there, he could have done it in a doze) and stepped into the Zenith House reception area, something in the back of his brain actually tried to flash a Code Red. It was as if all those alligator instincts which served him so well in three wars and half a dozen brushfire skirmishes had sniffed something out and were trying to warn him. But a command officer didn't call off a mission simply because of a little trench-fright. What a command officer did was remind himself of his objective.

"Designated Jew," Hecksler murmured. That was his objective. The liar who had led him on and then stolen his best ideas.

Nonetheless he continued to feel that electric tickle of unease, that sense of being watched. Being watched by the very walls, it seemed.

He looked sharply along those walls, keeping his gaze above eye-level and peering with special penetrating attention into the corners. No surveillance cameras. So that was all right.

He sniffed sharply, spreading the wings of his nose, really flaring the old nostrils.

"Garlic," he muttered. "No question. Known it and grown it. All my life. Ha! And…"

Something else, there was definitely something else, but he couldn't get it. Not, at least, in the reception area.

“Damn garlic,” he said. “Like a bore at a party. A bore with a loud voice.”

At the portal which lead into the editorial offices, that interior warning voice spoke again. Only two words, but Hecksler heard them clearly: GET OUT !

“Not happening,” he said, and issued the Saturday-silent world of Zenith House a tight and unpleasant grin that likely would have turned Herb Porter’s blood if he’d seen it. “Screaming lone eagle. Suicide mission, if that’s what it takes. Nobody goes home.”

A step further and the smell of garlic was gone, as if someone had rubbed the stuff around the doorway. What replaced it was an entrancing odor Hecksler knew well and loved above all things: the tangy, bitter smell of burst gunpowder. The smell of battle.

The General, who had hunched over a bit without even realizing it (the first impulse when going into an unknown and possibly dangerous area, he knew, was to protect the family jewels), now straightened up. He looked around with a mad glare that would have done more than turn Herb’s blood; it would have sent him fleeing in a blind panic. After a moment he relaxed. And now, below the bulging eyes, the lips first parted and then began to draw up. They reached the point where you would have said lips must stop and still they continued, until the corners seemed to have reached the level of Hecksler’s bulging blue eyes. The smile became a grin; the grin became a bigger grin; the bigger grin became a grimace; the grimace became a cannibal’s leer; the cannibal’s leer became an insane cannibal’s leer.

“Zenith House, I am here!” he thundered into the empty corridor with its faded gray industrial strength rug and its

framed book jackets of bosomy maidens and marching giant bugs on the walls. He struck his chest with a closed fist “You house of mockers, I am here! You den of thieves, I am here! Designated Jew, I AM HERE!”

His first impulse, curbed only with difficulty, was to remove his not inconsiderable penis from his pants and urinate everywhere: on the carpet, the walls, even the framed jacket covers if his admittedly aging piss-pump could fling the stream that high (twenty years before he could have washed the ceiling tiles, by God), like a dog marking its territory. Sanity didn’t reassert itself because there was none left in the haunted belfry of his brushcut-topped head, but there was still plenty of guile. Nothing must appear out of place here in the hallway. Chances that the D.J. would come in first on Monday were mighty slim.

“Goddam slacker is what he is,” Hecksler said. “A goddam commissary cowboy. Ha! Seen a thousand of em!”

And so he walked down the main corridor as decorously as a nun, passing doors marked WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF, KENTON, and GELB (that one another Jew, undoubtedly, but not the Jew) before coming to one marked…PORTER.

“Yessss,” Hecksler said, bringing the word out in a long and satisfying hiss, like steam.

There wasn’t even any need to pick the lock; the D.J.’s door was open. The General stepped in. And now…now that he’s in a place where he no longer has to be careful…gosh!

The urine which General Hecksler withheld in the hall goes into Herb Porter’s desk drawers, starting with the lower and working to the upper. There is even a final squirt for the keyboard of typewriter.

There’s an IN/OUT box filled with what look like submission letters, manuscript reports, and a personal letter (although typed) which begins Dear Fergus. Hecksler tears it all up and sprinkles the pieces on top of the desk like confetti.

Next to the IN/OUT is an envelope marked GOTHAM COLLECTIBLES, addressed to Mr. Herbert Porter care of Zenith House, and marked CONFIDENTIAL. Inside, the General finds three items. One is a letter which says, in essence, that the folks at Gotham Collectibles were mighty glad they could find the enclosed rarity for such a valued customer. The rarity is a Honus Wagner baseball card in a glassine envelope. The last enclosure is a bill in the amount of two hundred and fifty American men. The General is astounded and outraged. Two hundred and fifty dollars for a yid baseball player? And of course he is a yid; Hecksler can pick them out anywhere. Look at that schnozzola, by the jacked-up Jesus! (Unaware that Honus Wagner’s schnozzola is pretty much identical to Anthony Hecksler’s own.) Iron-Guts takes the card out of its envelope, and soon the image of Honus Wagner has joined the other, considerably less valuable, confetti on Herb’s desk.

Hecksler begins to sing softly, a beer jingle: “Here’s to you… for all you do…you des-ig-NAYY-ted Jew…”

There are the file cabinets. He could tip them over, but what if someone below heard the thud? And it seems meaningless. If he opens them, he knows what he’ll find: just more paper. He’s ripped enough of that for one day, by God. Also, he’s getting a little pooped. It’s been a stressful morning (a stressful week, a stressful month, a stressful goddam life). If he could find one more thing…one more meaningful thing…

And there it is. Most of the stuff on the walls is uninteresting—covers of books the D.J. has edited, photos of the D.J. with a number of men (and one woman) who the General supposes are writers but look to him suspiciously like wankers—but there's one picture that's different. Not only is it set off from the others, in its own little space, but the Herb Porter in it has an actual expression on his face. In the others, the best he's managed is a sort of oh-fuck-I'm-getting-my-goddam-picture-taken-again squint, but in this one he's actually smiling, and it is a smile of unquestionable love. The woman he's smiling at is taller than the D.J. and looks about sixty. Held in front of her is the sort of large black satchel purse which by law only woman of sixty or over may carry.

Hecksler croons, "I see me, I see you, I see the mother, of a designated Jew."

He pulls the picture from the wall, turns it over, and sees the sort of cardboard backing he would have expected. Oh yes, he knows his man: sly tricks in front, cardboard backing behind. Yowza.

Hecksler pulls out the cardboard, then the picture of Herb and his beloved Marmar, which was taken at the twentyfifth anniversary party Herb organized for his parents out on Montauk in 1978. Iron-Guts drops trou (they go down fast, perhaps because of the large fold-up knife in the right front pocket), grabs one skinny butt-cheek and gives it a brisk sideways yank, the better to present the back door, the tan track, the everloving dirt road. Then the former United States General, who was personally decorated by Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, rubs his ass briskly and thoroughly with this picture which Herb loves above all others.

Gosh, what a time we're having!

But good times wear a person out, especially an older person, especially an older bonkers person. Enough be enough, as Amos might have said to Andy. The General hauls up his pants, squares himself away, then sits down in Herb's office chair. He did not pee in this chair, mostly because it never occurred to him, so the seat is nice and dry.

He swivels slowly around and looks out Herb's window. No view; just a few feet of empty space and then the windows of another office building. Most of those are covered with venetian blinds, and where the blinds aren't drawn, the offices are perfectly still. No doubt somewhere in that building, as in this, executives are squeezing in a little overtime, but not in sight of Herb Porter's window.

The sun comes slanting in on General Hecksler's face, cruelly spotlighting his age-roughened skin and the burst veins at his temples; another vein, this one blue, pulses steadily in the middle of his deeply lined forehead. His eyelids are folded and wrinkled. More and more of them become visible as the General, who has dozed but not really slept in weeks, moves to the border which divides the land of wakefulness from that of Nod.

They close all the way…remain so, looking smoother now… and then they open again, disclosing faded blue eyes which are wary and crazy and most of all tired unto death. He has reached the border crossing—temporary peace lies beyond —but does he dare use it? Does he dare cross? There are so many enemies still, a world filled with scheming Jews, violent Italians, craven homosexuals, and thefty dance-footed Negros; so many sworn enemies of both the General and the country he has sworn to uphold…and could they be here now? Even now?

For a moment his lids take on their former wrinkled aspect as the eyes they guard open all the way, shifting in their sockets, but this only lasts a moment. The voice that warned him in the reception area has fallen silent, but he can still smell a lingering effluvia of gunsmoke, as soothing as memory.

Safe, that odor whispers. It is, of course, the odor and the voice of Zenith, the common ivy. You're safe. Home is the hunter, home from the hill, and you're safe for the next forty hours and more. Sleep, General. Sleep.

General Hecksler knows good advice when he hears it. Sitting in his enemy's chair, turned away from his enemy's desk (into which he has poured the piss of righteousness), General Hecksler sleeps.

He cannot see the ivy which has already entered this room and grows invisibly around his shoes and up the walls. Smelling gunpowder and dreaming of ancient battles, General Hecksler begins to snore.

April 4, 1981

490 Park Avenue South

New York City

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 55 F.

10:37 A.M.

When Frank DeFelice arrives at 490 Park Avenue South, stepping out of a Checker Cab and tipping a perfectly precise ten per cent, he’s not in the same buoyant mood as George Patella the soft-drink fella, but he’s every bit as preoccupied. DeFelice works at Tallyrand Office Supply on the 7th floor, and he has forgotten some paperwork he needs in order to be ready for the pre-inventory meeting at 9 A.M. on Monday morning. His intention is to simply dash up, grab the inventory summaries, and head back to Grand Central. DeFelice lives in Croton-on-Hudson, and plans to spend the afternoon doing yard work. This Saturday trip down to the city is your basic PITA: pain in the ass.

He takes some vague notice of the man in the sand-colored business suit standing to the left of the door; the man is holding a large attache case and checking his watch. He is young for the suit, but good-looking and wellgroomed: blond, blue-eyed. Certainly Carlos Detweiller, who has his mother’s Nordic genes, doesn’t look like anyone’s idea of a spic, designated or otherwise.

As DeFelice opens the lobby door with his key, the young man with the attache case sighs and murmurs, “Hold it a sec, would you?”

Frank DeFelice obligingly holds the door and they cross the lobby together, heels clicking and echoing.

“People shouldn’t be allowed to be late on Saturdays,” the young man says, and DeFelice gives an agreeable, meaningless little smile. His mind is a million miles away...well, forty, at any rate, dwelling on various spring bulbs and fertilizers.

Perhaps this run of thought is why he notices a certain odd smell about the young man as they step into the elevator together—a certain earthy smell, almost like peat. Can that be some new aftershave? Something called Spring Garden or April Delight?

DeFelice pushes for seven.

“Hit five while you’re at it, would you?” the young man in the sand-colored suit asks, and DeFelice notices an interesting thing: there’s a combination lock on the guy’s attache case. That’s sort of cool, he thinks, and that thought leads to another: Father’s Day isn’t that far off. Hints dropped in the right location (to the mother of his children rather than the children themselves, in other words) might not go amiss. In fact—

“Five?” the young man in the sand-colored suit asks again, and DeFelice pushes five. He then points at the attache case.

“Abercrombie?” he asks.

“Kmart,” the young man replies, and offers a smile that makes DeFelice slightly nervous. It has an emptiness that goes beyond daffy. The two men journey silently after that, rising in the faint smell of peat.

Carlos Detweiller steps out on five. He walks to the wall where there are arrows pointing the way to the various businesses: Barco Novel-Teaz, Crandall & Ovitz, Attorneys at Law, Zenith Publishing. He is examining these when the elevator doors slide shut. Frank DeFelice feels a momentary relief, then turns his mind to his own affairs.

10:38 A.M.

General Hecksler has sprung the lock instead of forcing it, and Carlos enters Zenith House without considering the unlocked main door suspicious— he's a gardener, a writer, and a Psykik Savant, after all, not a detective. Also, he's spent so many years getting what he wants that he's come to expect it.

In the reception area he smells garlic and nods briskly, like a man whose suspicions have been confirmed. Although in truth, they are rather more than suspicions. He is in touch with certain Powers, after all, and they've kept him ahead of the curve (as mid-level executives such as Frank DeFelice and George Patella might say) in most respects. One of the respects in which they have been a trifle behind the curve has to do with Iron-Guts Hecksler's current presence in the Zenith offices. Drawing conclusions in matters supernatural is always a risky business, but we might assume from this that the Powers of Darkness enjoy a giggle as much as the rest of us.

Yet does Carlos not smell something other than garlic out here? Certainly a frown clouds his blandly handsome face. Then it clears. He dismisses the faint whiff of the General's insanity which his trained nose has picked up as no more than a lingering trace of the receptionist's perfume. (What, one wonders, would such a perfume be called? Paranoia in Paris?)

Carlos moves across the room and pauses. Here the smell of garlic is stronger. She told them how to keep it in its place, he thinks, meaning the late Tina Barfield. Did she also tell them that, given a taste of the right blood, such precautions would be useless? Perhaps. In any case, it doesn't matter. He could care less at this point. Zenith would likely take care of John Kenton given time, but "likely" isn't good enough for Carlos Detweiller, and he doesn't have time. There probably won't be time to make John Kenton his zombie slave, either, but there should be enough time on Monday morning to cut Kenton's lying, misleading, thieving heart out of his chest. Carlos has plenty of knives in his Sakred Case, not to mention a new brush-cutter from American Gardener. He hopes to use this to remove Mr. John "Poop-Shit" Kenton's scalp. He can wear it like a hat while he snacks on "Poop-Shit's" valves and ventricles.

Carlos steps into the hall beyond the reception area and pauses again. He stands exactly where Hecksler stood when he proclaimed his presence to the empty offices. He notes (not without admiration) the framed book jackets: a giant ant poised over a screaming, half-nude woman; a mercenary shooting down a squad of charging Oriental soldiers while a city that appears to be Miami flames in the background; a woman in a slip in the embrace of a bare-chested pirate who appears to have an erection the size of an industrial plumbing fixture inside his colorful pantaloons; a red-eyed lurker watching the approach of a young lady on a deserted street; two or three cookbooks, just for spice.

Carlos thinks with some longing that in a better world, where people were honest, the jacket of his own book might be up

there, as well. True Tales of Demon Infestations, with a photo of the one and only Carlos Detweiller on the cover. Smoking a pipe, perhaps, and looking Lovecrafty. That is not to be… but they will pay. Kenton, at least, will pay.

The hall looks empty except for the framed covers and the doors to the editorial cubicles beyond them, but the newcomer knows better. “Carlos, you weren’t born yesterday or even the day before,” as Mr. Keen might have said in happier times, times when people didn’t forget who was supposed to win all the card games.

Looks, however, can be deceiving.

With the garlic-rubbed portal behind him, Carlos can easily smell the Tibetan kadath ivy he has sent John Kenton, and he smells its true aroma: not popcorn, chocolate, coffee, honeysuckle, or Shalimar perfume but a darker odor, strict and sharp. It isn’t oil of clove, but perhaps that comes closest. It is a smell Carlos has detected emanating from his own armpits when he has been being strenuously psykik.

He closes his eyes and murmurs, “Talla. Demeter. Abbalah. Great Opoponax.” He breathes deep and the smell intensifies, filling his head, making it swim with visions that are dark and full of gusty-cold flying. They are visions of the land to which he will soon be going, the place where he will make his transition from earthy mortal to tulpa, a creature of the invisible world fully capable of returning to this one and possessing the bodies of the still-living. Perhaps he will use this power; perhaps he will not. Right now, such things do not matter.

He opens his eyes again and yes, there is the kadath. It is growing all over the walls and the carpet, thinning as it advances toward the reception area, thick and luxuriant further down the corridor. Somewhere down there, Carlos knows, is the place where the original pot still resides, buried in billowing drifts of green which would be invisible to all those who don't believe in the plant's power. The far end of the corridor looks as impenetrable as a rainforest jungle, buried in growth right up to the fluorescents, but Carlos knows people could walk blithely up and down that corridor with absolutely no idea of what they were walking through…unless, of course, Zenith wanted them to know. In which case it would be the last thing they'd ever know. Basically, Zenith House is now a large green bear trap, spring-loaded.

Carlos walks down the corridor, Sakred Sakrifice Case held at chest level. He steps over the first trailing strand of Zenith, then an entire clot of entwined branches and rhizomes. One stirs and touches his ankle. Carlos stands patiently, and after a moment the strand drops away. Here, on the left, is the office of WADE EDITOR IN CHIEF. Carlos glances in without much interest, then passes on to the next door. Here the ivy-growth is much thicker, the strands covering the lower part of the door in zigzag patterns and twining around the knob in a loose lover's knot. One strand clings to the upper panel, which is glass, and streaks across the name like a stroke of green lightning.

"Kenton," Carlos says in a low voice. "You mocker."

10:44 A.M.

In Herb Porter’s o ffice, General Anthony Hecksler opens his eyes. The thought that he may have dreamed the voice never so much as crosses his mind. What he has heard is this: Kenton, you mockie.

Someone else is in the Zenith House o ffices.

Someone else on a Saturday morning.

Iron-Guts has a pretty good idea who the someone else must be. “Tick-tick,” he whispers, his lips barely moving. “Designated spic.” In his doze, Hecksler has slid down a bit in Porter’s chair. Now he

slides even farther, wanting to make absolutely sure that the top of his head won’t show if the D.S. should wander a few yards farther down the hall. It’s okay for “Carlos” to see the mess in here as long as he doesn’t see the man in here.

Silent as a sigh, Hecksler eases his hand into the pocket of his pants and pulls out another of his Army-Navy store purchases: a bone-handled hunting knife with a seven-inch tungsten blade.

There is the faintest click as the General unfolds the blade and locks it into position. He holds it against his chest, the tip nearly touching the undershelf of his stringently shaved chin, and waits for whatever comes next.

Central Park

Skies fair, winds light, temperature 60 F.

10:50 A.M.

Bill Gelb is so excited about his planned excursion to Paramus that he hardly slept at all last night, and still he feels energized this Saturday morning, totally jazzed. He couldn’t stay in the goddam apartment, just couldn’t. The question was, where to go? Ordinarily he’d think movie, Bill loves the movies, but he couldn’t sit still in one today. And then, in the shower, the answer came.

On a Saturday morning in Central Park, especially on a pretty spring morning like this one, there’ll be a veritable Olympic games going on, everything from skateboarding and pick-up softball to chess and checkers.

There will also be a crap game going on at the edge of the Sheep Meadow; of this Bill is almost sure. It may have been closed down, but he can’t imagine why the cops would bust such an innocuous game: low stakes, young white guys pretending to be cool dudes rolling the bones. Seven come eleven, baby needs a new pair of Adidas sneakers. A bottle or two of cheap wine will make the rounds, allowing the players to feel totally raffish, not to say decadent, shooting craps and drinking Night Train at eleven o’clock in the morning.

Bill has played in this game maybe half a dozen times over the last two years, always in warm weather. He likes to gamble, but shooting craps in Central Park when the temperature is below forty? No way. But today WINS radio says the mercury may shoot all the way up to an unseasonable seventy degrees, and besides…what better way to see if the force is still with him?

Which is why—as Riddley's train approaches Manhattan, as Sandra and her niece continue their whirlwind tour of Cony Island's early-season amusements, as Carlos Detweiller begins inspecting "Poop-Shit" Kenton's files, and General Hecksler sits slouched in Herb Porter's office chair, knife gleaming in the sunlight—we find Bill Gelb down on his knees in a circle of yelling, laughing white guys who are happy to fade his heat. Lucky son of a bitch got in the game, bet two guys to crap out (and won), then took the dice himself. Since then he's rolled five straight sevens. Now he's promising them a sixth, and further promising them it'll be sixty-one. Dude is crazy, so of course they're happy to fade him. And Bill is happy, as well. As happy as he's ever been in his life, it seems to him. He showed up here on the Meadow with just fifteen dollars in his pocket, deliberately leaving the rest of his cash at home; he's already tripled that. And this, by God, is just the warmup! Tonight, in Paramus, he will sit down to the main course.

"God bless that crazy houseplant," he murmurs, and rolls the dice onto the painted hopscotch grid that serves as the pit. They bounce, they roll, they tumble—

—and the Saturday morning yuppie crap-artists groan in mingled disbelief, despair, and amazement.

It’s six and one.

Bill snatches up the wad of currency lying on the HOME slot of the hopscotch grid, smacks it, and holds it up to the bright blue sky, laughing.

“You want to pass the dice, Mr. Lucky?” one of the other players asks.

“When I’m on a roll like this?” Bill Gelb leans forward and snatches the dice. “No fuckin way.” The bones feel warm in his hand. Someone hands him a bottle of Boone’s Farm and he takes a hit. “No fuckin way am I passing,” he repeats. “Gents, I’m going to roll these bones until the spots fall off.”

11:05 A.M.

The kadath has infiltrated Kenton’s office right through the cracks at the edges of the door, growing exuberantly up the walls, but Carlos barely notices. The ivy is nothing to him, one way or the other. Not now. It might have been fun to sit back and watch it work if not for Tina Barfield, but the bitch stole his owl’s beak and time has grown short. Let Zenith take care of the rest if it wants to; Kenton is his.

“You mocker,” he says again. “You thief.”

As in Herb’s o ffice, there are pictures on the walls of Kenton with various authors. Carlos cares nothing for the authors (they look like wankers to him, too), but he looks fixedly at the repetitions of Kenton himself, memorizing the lean face with its shock of too-long black hair. What does he think he is? Carlos asks himself indignantly. A damned old rock star? A Beatle? A Rolling Stone? The name of a rock and roll group Kenton could belong to occurs to him: Johnny and the Poop-Shits.

As always, Carlos is startled by his own wit. He is serious so much of the time that he’s always shocked at what a good sense of humor he has. Now he barks laughter.

Still chuckling, he tries Kenton’s desk drawers, but, unlike Herb’s, they are locked. There is an IN/OUT box on top of the desk, but, also unlike Herb’s, it is almost completely empty. The one sheet of paper has several lines jotted on it that Carlos doesn’t understand in the slightest:

Leper hockey game: face o ff in the corner

7: 6 to carry the coffin, 1 to carry the boombox

Never mind the jam on your mouth, what’s that peanut butter doing on your forehead? “Fuck the mailman, give him a dollar and a sweet roll.”

Orange manhole cover in France=Howard Johnson’s.

What in the name of Demeter is all that crap about? Carlos doesn’t know and decides he doesn’t care, either.

He goes to Kenton’s file cabinets, expecting them to be locked as well, but he has a long weekend ahead of him, and if he gets bored, he can open both the desk and the files. He has plenty of tools in the Sakrifice Case that will do the job. But the drawers of the file cabinets turn out to be unlocked —go figure.

Carlos begins searching the files with a high degree of interest that quickly fades. Poop-Shit’s files are alphabetized, but after CURRAN, JAMES (author of four paperback originals in 1978 and ’79, with titles like Love’s Strange Delight and Love’s Strange Obsession), comes DORCHESTER, ELLEN (six brief manuscript reports, each signed by Kenton and each attached to a rejection letter). There’s no file marked DETWEILLER, CARLOS.*

The one item of interest Carlos discovers is in the bottom drawer, lying behind the few hanging files marked W-Z. It’s a framed photograph which undoubtedly graced Kenton’s desk until recently. In it, Kenton and a pretty young Oriental woman are standing on the rink at Rockefeller Plaza with their arms around each other, laughing into the camera.

A smile of surpassing nastiness dawns on Carlos’s face. The woman is in California, but for a genuine Psykik Savant, a few thousand miles presents

* Such a file by then existed, of course, and it contained material that might well have caused Detweiller to explode with rage, but it was in the publishing house safe, behind a picture in Roger Wade’s office. Neither Hecksler nor Detweiller so much as entered that office. That file also

contained material concerning the General and the company’s new mascot.

absolutely no problem. Miss Ruth Tanaka is already discovering that she has backed the wrong horse in the Romance Sweepstakes. Carlos knows she’ll be back in New York before long, and thinks that she may stop by Zenith House shortly after she arrives. Kenton will be dead by then, but she will have questions, won’t she? Yes. The ladies always have questions.

And when she comes…

“Innocent blood,” Carlos murmurs. He tosses the framed photo back into the drawer and the glass front shatters. In the quiet office, the sound is satisfyingly loud. Across the hall, General Hecksler jumps slightly in Herb’s chair, almost pricking himself with his own knife.

Carlos kicks the file-drawer shut, goes across to Kenton’s desk, and sits down in Kenton’s chair. He feels like Goldilocks, only with a pretty decent stiffy. He sits there for a little while, drumming the fingers of one hand on the Sakrifice Case and idly boinking his hardon with the fingers of the other. Later, he thinks, he’ll probably masturbate—it is something he does often and well. Not knowing, of course, that his days of self-abuse are now gone.

In the office across the corridor, Iron-Guts has taken up a position against the wall to the left of Herb Porter’s door. He can see a reflection of the office across the way in Herb’s window—faint, but good enough. When “Carlos” comes out

to further recon the area, as sooner or later he will, the General will be ready.

11:15 A.M.

It occurs to Carlos that he’s hungry. It further occurs to him that he has forgotten to bring any food. There might be candy bars or something in Kenton’s desk—gum, at least, everyone has a few sticks of gum lying around—but the jeezly bastardly thing is locked. Prying open the drawers in search of something that might not be there seems like too much work.

What about the other o ffices, though? Maybe there’s even a canteen, with sodas and everything. Carlos decides to check. He has nothing but time, after all.

He gets up, goes to the door, and steps out. Once again the ivy in the hall touches his shoes; one strand curls around his ankle. Once again Carlos stands patiently until the strand lets go. The words pass, friend whisper in his head.

Carlos goes to the next door down the hall, the one marked JACKSON. He doesn’t hear Herb Porter’s door as it opens squeaklessly behind him; doesn’t sense the tall old man with the knife in his hand who’s measuring distances with cold blue eyes and finding them acceptable.

As Carlos opens the door to Sandra’s o ffice, Iron-Guts springs. One forearm—old, scrawny, hideously strong—hooks around Carlos’s throat and shuts off his air. Carlos has a moment to feel a new emotion: utter terror. Then a lightning-bright line of heat prints itself across his lower midsection. He thinks he has been burned with something, perhaps even branded, and would have screamed if not for his closed windpipe. He hasn’t the slightest idea that he’s been partially disemboweled, and has only avoided the total deal by staggering to his left, bumping the General against the edge of Sandra Jackson’s door, and causing him to slash a little high and nowhere near as deeply as he intended.

“You’re one dead SOB.” Hecksler whispers these words in Carlos’s ear as tenderly as a lover. Carlos smells Rolaids and madness. He throws himself to the right, against the other side of the door, but the General is ready for this trick and rides him as easily as a cowpoke on an old nag. He raises the knife again, meaning to open Carlos’s throat for him. Then he hesitates.

“What kind of spic has blond hair and blue eyes?” he asks. “What—” He feels the mothflutter of Carlos’s hand against his thigh an instant too late. Before he can draw back, the designated spic has grabbed his testicles and crushed them in the iron grip of one who is fighting for his life and knows it.

“ YOWWW!” Hecksler cries, and for just one moment the armlock on Carlos’s throat weakens. It isn’t the pain, enormous though it is, that causes the death-grip to

weaken; Iron-Guts has devoted years to living with pain and through it. No, it’s surprise. The D.S. is being choked, the D.S. has been slashed, and still he is fighting back.

Carlos throws himself to the left again, slamming the General’s bony shoulder against the doorjamb. Hecksler’s grip loosens a bit more, and before he can re-establish it, Zenith—more in the spirit of puckish good humor than anything else—takes a hand.

It’s actually the General’s feet the ivy takes, wrapping a loose green fist around both and yanking backward. Although the branches are still new and thin (some are pulled apart by Hecksler’s weight), Z’s grip is surprisingly strong. And surprise, of course, is the key word. If Iron-Guts had expected such a cowardly sneak attack, he almost certainly would have kept his feet. Instead, he thumps heavily to his knees.

Carlos whirls in the doorway, gasping and gagging and hacking for air. He still feels that band of heat across his belly, and it seems to be spreading. The bastard shocked me, he thinks. He had one of those things, those illegal laser things.

He has to get back to Kenton’s o ffice, where he has foolishly left the Sakrifice Case, but when he starts forward, the General slashes his knife through the air. Carlos recoils just fast enough to keep from losing his nose. The General bares

his teeth at Carlos—those that have survived the Shady Rest Mortuary, at least. Bright color blazons his cheeks.

“Get out of my way!” Carlos squalls. “ Abbalah! Abbalah can tak! Demeter can tah! Gah! Gam!”

“Save your spic gabble for someone who gives a rip,” the General says. He makes no attempt to get off his knees, simply sways from side to side, looking as mystic (and as deadly) as any snake ever piped out of a fakir’s basket. “You want to get past me, son? Then come on. Try for it.”

Carlos looks over the old man’s shoulder and sees there are still green boughs of ivy looped around the old man’s ankles.

“Kadath!” Carlos calls. “Cam-ma! Can tak!”These words mean nothing in themselves. They are invocatory in nature, Carlos Detweiller’s way of shaping a telepathic command. He has told Zenith to yank the old man again, to pull him right down the hall into the main growth and crush him.

Instead, the knots around the General’s ankles untie themselves and slither away.

“No!” Carlos bawls. He cannot believe that the Dark Powers have deserted him. “No, come back! Kadath! Kadath can tak!”

“Better take a look at yourself, son,” General Hecksler advises slyly.

Carlos looks down and sees that his sand-colored suit has turned bright red from the coat pockets on down. There’s a long, tattered rip across his midsection; the end of his tie has actually been lopped off. He can see something shiny

and purple in the slash and realizes with disbelieving dismay that those are his guts.

While he's distracted, Hecksler lunges forward and swipes with his knife again. This time he opens Carlos's shoulder down to the bone. "Olay!" Iron-Guts screams.

"You crazy old fuck!" Carlos screams back, and lashes out a foot. This sends a terrible dull cramp of pain through his belly and a freshet of blood down the front of his pants, but the shoe catches General Hecksler square in the skinny beak and breaks it. He goes flopping back. Carlos starts forward but the evil old bastard is up on his knees again in a goddamned flash, slashing everywhere. What is he made of, iron?

Carlos dodges back into Sandra's office, panting, and slams the door just as Hecksler curls the fingers of his free hand around the jamb. Hecksler utters a howl as his fingers are crushed, and it is music to Carlos's ears. But the old son of a bitch won't stop. He's like a robot with its selector switch frozen on KILL. Carlos hears the office door bang open behind him as he staggers across Sandra's office with the left arm of his jacket turning crimson and one hand on his slashed midsection, trying to keep those purple things in where they belong. He hears a harsh, doglike panting as air rushes in and out of the madman's old lungs. In a moment the robot will be on him again. The robot has a weapon; Carlos has none. Even if he had his Sakrifice Case, the robot would give him no time to work the combination.

I'm going to die, Carlos thinks wonderingly. If I don't do something right away, I'm actually going to die. He has known that death was coming, of course, but until this minute it has been an academic concept. There is nothing

academic about having a crazy robot after you while blood pours down your arm and legs, however.

Carlos looks at Sandra's desk, which is a cluttery, paper-strewn mess. Scissors? A letter-opener? Even a damned nailfile? Anything— Good Demeter, what's that?

Lying beside her blotter, partly obscured by a framed photo of Sandra and Dina taken on their trip to Nova Scotia two years before, is a large silver object which looks like a gunshell. Sandra, her mind full of books and plants and manuscripts and tales of elderly Rhode Island zombies, has forgotten to put the gunshell in her purse when she left on Friday afternoon. Also, it's now easy for her to forget: the plant has given her a new sense of security and well-being. This object no longer seems so vital to her.

It's vital to Carlos, though.

Carlos has spotted Sandra's Rainy Night Friend.

11:27 A.M.

"What's the matter, Aunt Sandra?" Dina asks. A moment before they were been walking down the boardwalk together, eating the delicious grilled franks you can only get at Cony. Then Sandra stopped, gasped, and put a hand to her stomach. "Is your hotdog no good?"

"It's fine," Sandra said, although a sudden pain had, in fact, just ripped through her belly. It wasn't the kind of pain she associated with food-poisoning, but she turned and

deposited the remainder of her dog in a trash barrel just the same. She was no longer hungry.

“Then what is it?”

It was a voice in her head, calling. But if she told Dina that, her niece would probably think she was crazy. Especially if she told her it was a green voice.

“I don’t know,” Sandra said, “but maybe I ought to take you home, hon. If I’m going to get sick, I don’t want to get caught all the way out here.”

11:27 A.M.

John Kenton has been scrambling eggs in his little kitchen, whistling “ChimChim-Chiree” from Mary Poppins as he stirs with his whisk. The pain comes like lightning out of a blue sky, ripping across his middle, there and gone.

He cries out and jerks backward, the whisk pulling the frypan o ff the stove and splattering half-congealed eggs on the linoleum. Both the eggs and the pan miss his bare feet, which could almost qualify as a miracle.

The office, he thinks. I have to get to the office. Something’s gone wrong. And then his head suddenly fills with sound and he screams.

11:28 A.M.

Roger Wade is already headed for the door of his apartment when the unearthly yowl of Sandra’s Rainy Day Friend fills his head, threatening to burst it open from the inside out. He drops to his knees like a man who’s had a heart attack, holding his head and uttering screams he can’t hear.

11:28 A.M.

On the edge of the Sheep’s Meadow, the little cluster of Saturday morning gamblers watch the fleeing man with bemused surprise. He was cleaning them out, righteously and in record time. Then, suddenly, he gave a scream and lurched to his feet, first clutching his gut and then slamming the heels of his hands against his ears, as if assaulted by some monstrous sound. As if to confirm this, he had gasped “Oh God, turn it off!” Then he fled, staggering from side to side like a drunk.

“What’s up with him?” one of the crap-artists asked.

“I don’t know,” said another, “but I know one thing: he left the gelt.” For a moment they simply look at the untidy pile of bills beside Bill

Gelb’s vacated spot. Then, quite spontaneously, the six of them begin to applaud.

April 4, 1981

Somewhere in New Jersey

Aboard the Silver Meteor 11:28 A.M.

In his seat by the window, Riddley is asleep and dreaming of other, younger days. He is dreaming, in fact, of 1961. In his dream, he and Maddy are walking to school hand in hand beneath a brilliant November sky. Together they chant their old favorite, which they made up themselves: “Whammerjammer-Alabammer! Beetle Bailey, Katzenjammer! Gi’me back my goddam hammer! Whammer-jammer-Alabammer!” Then they giggle.

It is a good day. The Cuban stu ff, which scared everybody near bout to death, is over. Rid has drawn a pitcher, and he thinks Mrs. Ellis will ask him to show it to the rest of the kinnygarden. Mrs. Ellis likes his pitchers.

Then, suddenly, Maddy stops. From the north comes a rising rumble. She looks at him solemnly. “Those are the bombers,” she says. “Hit happened. Hit’s World War Three.”

“Naw,” Riddley says. “Hit’s over. The Roosians backed down. Kennedy scared em honest. Bald Roosian fella told his boats to turn around and go home. Mama said so.”

“Mama’s crazy,” Maddy replies. “She sleeps on the riverbank. She sleeps with the copperhaids.”

And as if to prove it, the Blackwater air-raid siren goes off, deafening him—

11:29 A.M.

Riddley straightens up and stares out at New Jersey: stares, in fact, at the exact swampy wasteland he will that night be visiting.

The man across the aisle looks up from his paperback book. “Are you all right, sir?” he asks.

Riddley cannot hear him. The air-raid siren has followed him out of his dream. It is filling his head, bursting his brains.

Then, suddenly, it cuts off. When the man across the aisle asks his question again, this time with real concern, Riddley hears him.

“Yes, thanks,” he says in a voice that’s almost steady. In his head, the old rhyme beats: Whammer-jammer-Alabammer. “I’m fine.”

But some folks are not, he thinks. Some folks most definitely are not.

490 Park Avenue South 5th floor

11:29 A.M.

In 1970, a large number of American brass were celebrating at a Saigon bar and whorehouse called Haiphong Charlie’s. Word had come down from Washington that the war would certainly continue for at least another year, and these career soldiers, who had gotten the ass-kicking of their lives over the last twenty months or so and wanted payback more than

they wanted life itself, were raising the roof. The miracle was that something in the bomb the anonymous waiter planted was defective, and instead of spraying the whole room with nails and screws, it only sprayed those soldiers who happened to be near the stage, where it had been hidden in a flower arrangement. One of those unfortunates was Anthony Hecksler's aide-de-camp. Poor sonofabitch lost both hands and one eye while he was doing the frug or the Watusi or one of those.

Hecksler himself was on the edge of the room, talking with Westy Westmoreland, and although a number of nails flew between them—both men heard their whining passage—neither suffered so much as a nicked earlobe. But the sound of the explosion in that small room was enormous. IronGuts hadn't minded being spared the screams of the wounded, but it had been nine full days before his hearing began to come back. He had about given that sensation up for dead when it finally returned home (and still for a week or so every conversation had been like a transatlantic phone call in the nineteen-twenties). His ears have been sensitive to loud noises ever since.

Which is why, when Carlos yanks the pull-ring in the center of the silver thing, setting off the high-decibel siren, Iron-Guts recoils with a harsh grunt of surprise and pain —"AHHH?"—and puts his hands to his ears.

All at once the knife is pointing at the ceiling instead of at Carlos, and Carlos doesn't hesitate to take advantage. Badly hurt as he is, as surprised as he is, he's never gone more

than half a step over the edge of panic. He knows there are only two ways out of this office, and that the five-story drop from the windows behind him is unacceptable. It must be the door, and that means he must deal with The General.

Near the top of the screaming gunshell, about eight inches beyond the pull-ring, is a promising red button. As The General lunges forward again, Carlos thrusts the gunshell gadget at him and pushes the button. He’s hoping for acid.

A cloud of white stu ff billows from the pinhole in the very tip of the gunshell and envelops the General. Hi-Pro gas isn’t acid—not quite—but it isn’t cotton candy, either. The General feels as if a swarm of biting insects (Gnats from Hell) had just settled on the wet and delicate surfaces of his eyes. These same insects pour up his nostrils, and the General suspends breathing at once.

Like Carlos, he keeps control. He knows he’s been gassed. Even blinded, he can deal with that, has dealt with it before. It’s the siren that’s really screwing up his action. It’s bludgeoning his brains.

He falls back toward the door, pressing his free hand against his left ear and waving the knife in front of him, creating what he hopes will be a zone of serious injury.

And then, oh praise God, the siren quits. Maybe its Taiwanese circuits are defective; maybe the nine-volt battery which powered it just ran out of juice. Hecksler doesn't give Shit One which it is. All he knows is that he can think again, and this fills his warrior's heart with gratitude.

With luck, however, the D.S. won't know he's got it back together. A little acting is in order. Hecksler staggers against the side of the door, still screaming. He allows the knife to drop. His eyes, he knows, are swelling shut. If Carlos buys his ruse—

Carlos does. The doorway is clear. The man sagging against one side of it is out of action, must be out of action after that. Carlos tries to give him another spray for good measure, but this time when he triggers the button there's nothing but an impotent phut sound and a little gasp of something like steam. No matter. Time to get while the getting is good. Carlos staggers for the office doorway, his blood-sodden pants sticking to his legs. He is already thinking, in a hysterical and unformed way, about emergency rooms and assumed names.

The General is blind and the General is deaf, but his nose hasn't swelled entirely shut and he catches that dark, peaty odor which Frank DeFelice noticed in the elevator. He straightens up and lashes out at the center of the smell. The Army-Navy hunting knife goes into Carlos's chest up to the hilt, skewering the Mad Florist's heart like a piece of beef on a shish kabob. If he had been at Cony Island with Sandra

and Dina, Iron-Guts undoubtedly would have won a teddy bear.

Carlos takes two shu ffling steps backward, tearing the knife out of the General’s grip. He looks down at it unbelievingly and utters a single incoherent word. It sounds like Iggala (not that the General can hear it), but it’s probably Abbalah. He tries to pull the knife free and cannot. His legs fold up and he drops to his knees. He is still pulling feebly at the hilt when he falls forward, pushing the tip of the blade all the way out through the back of his jacket. His heart gives a final spasm around the knife that has outraged it and then quits. Carlos feels a sensation of flying as the stained and filthy piece of laundry which is his soul finally flies off the line of his life and into whatever world there comes next.

11:33 A.M.

Iron-Guts can’t see, but he knows when his enemy dies—he feels the passage of the son of a bitch’s soul, and good goddam riddance. He staggers in the doorway, lost in a world of black space and streaming white dots like galaxies.

“Now what?” he croaks.

The first thing is to get away from the gas the Designated Spic shot into his face. Hecksler backs into the hall, breathing as shallowly as possible, and then a voice speaks to him.

This way, Tony, it says calmly. Turn portside. I’m going to lead you out.

“Doug?” Hecksler croaks.

Yep. It’s me , General MacArthur says. You’re not exactly looking squared away, Tony, but you’re still standing at the end of the fight, and that’s the important thing. Turn portside, now. Walk forty paces, and that’s gonna take you to the elevator.

Iron-Guts has lost his usually formidable sense of direction, but with that voice to guide him, he doesn’t need it. He turns portside, which happens to be directly away from the reception area and the elevator. Blind, now facing toward the ivy-choked far end of the hallway, he begins to walk, trailing one hand along the wall. At first he thinks the soft touch slithering around his shoulders are Dougout Doug’s guiding hands...but how can they be so thin? How can there be so many fingers? And what is that bitter smell?

Then Zenith is winding itself around his neck, shutting o ff his air, yanking him forward into its cannibal embrace. Hecksler tries to scream. Leaf-decked branches, slender but horribly strong, leap eagerly into his mouth. One wraps around the leathery meat of his tongue and yanks it out. Others thrust their way down his elderly gullet, anxious to sample the digestive stew of the General’s last meal (two doughnuts, a cup of black coffee, and half a roll of antacids). Zenith loops bracelets of ivy around his arms and thighs. It fashions a new belt around his waist. It picks his pockets, spilling out a mostly nonsensical strew of litter: receipts, memoranda to himself, a guitar pick, twenty or thirty dollars

in assorted change and currency, one of the S&H stamp-books in which he wrote his dispatches.

Anthony “Iron-Guts” Hecksler is pulled briskly into the jungle which now infests the rear of the fifth floor with his clothes shredding and his pockets turned out, feeding the plant the blood of insanity, bringing it to full life and consciousness, and here he passes out of our tale forever.

From John Kenton’s diary

April 4, 1981

It’s 10:45 P.M., and I’m sitting here waiting for the phone to ring. I remember, not so long ago, sitting in this same chair and waiting for Ruth to call, thinking that nothing could be worse than being a man in love sending thought-waves at the telephone, trying to make it ring.

But this is worse.

This is much worse.

Because when the phone finally rings, what if it’s not Bill or Riddley on

the other end of the line? What if it’s some New Jersey cop who wants to know—

No. I refuse to let my mind run in that direction. It'll ring and it will be one of them. Or maybe Roger, if they call him first and leave it to him to call me. But everything is going to be fine.

Because now we have protection.

Let me go back to when I yanked the frypan right off the stove (which turned out to be something of a blessing; when I got back to the apartment some hours later, I discovered I'd left the burner on). I grabbed the kitchen table and kept on my feet, and then that goddamned siren went off in the middle of my head.

I don't know how long it went on; pain really does negate the whole concept of time. Fortunately, the reverse also seems to be true: given time, even the most horrible pain loses its immediacy, and you can no longer remember exactly how it felt. This was bad, I know that much—like having the most delicate tissues of your body repeatedly raked by some sharp, barbed object.

When it finally did stop, I was cringing against the wall between the kitchen and my combination living room/study, shaking and sobbing, my cheeks wet with tears and my upper lip lathered with snot.

The pain was gone, but the sense of urgency wasn't. I needed to get to

the office, and just as fast as I could. I was almost down to the lobby of my building when I checked to see if I'd put anything on my feet. As it happened, I'd found an old pair of

moccasins. I must have gotten them out of the closet by the TV, although I'll be damned if I can remember that part. If my feet had been bare, I'm not sure I could have forced myself to go back up to the ninth floor. That's how strong that sense of urgency was.

Of course I knew what the siren in my head had been, even though I'd never been given an actual demonstration of Sandra's Rainy Day Friend, and I suppose I knew what was calling me, as well: our new mascot.

I caught a taxi with no trouble—thank God for Saturdays—and the run from my place to Zenith House was a quick one. Bill Gelb was standing out in front, pacing back and forth with one side of his shirt untucked and hanging down over his belt, running his hands back and forth through his hair, which was standing up in spikes and quills. He looked as nutty as the old lady in front of Smiler's, and

Funny thought to have. Because there was no lady in front of Smiler's, not really. We know that now.

I'm getting ahead of myself again, but it's hard to write scintillating prose when you can't stop looking at the phone, willing the damned thing to go off and put an end to the suspense, one way or the other. But I'll try. I think I must try.

Bill saw me and raced over to the cab. He started grabbing at my arm while I was still trying to pay the driver, pulling me onto the curb as if I'd fallen into a shark-infested pool. I dropped some coins and started to bend over.

“Leave em, for Christ sake, leave em!” he barked. “Have you got your office keys? I left mine on the bureau at home. I was out for a...” Out for a walk was what he meant to say, but instead of finishing he gave a kind of outof-breath, screamy laugh. A woman passing us gave him a hard look and hurried on a little faster. “Oh shit, you know what I was doing.”

Indeed I did. He’d been shooting craps in Central Park, but he’d left the majority of his cash on his bureau (along with his office keyring) because he had other plans for it. I could have gotten the other plans, too, if I’d wanted to look, but I didn’t. One thing was obvious: the telepathic range of the plant has gotten stronger. A lot.

We started for the door, and just then another cab pulled up. Herb Porter got out, redder in the face than I’d ever seen him. The man looked like a stroke waiting to happen. I’d never seen him in bluejeans, either, or with his shirt misbuttoned so it bloused out on one side. Also, it was sticking to his body and his hair (what little of it there is; he keeps it cropped short) was wet.

“I was in the goddam shower, okay?” he said. “Come on.”

We went to the door and I managed to get my key in the slot after three pokes. My hand was shaking so badly I had to grasp my wrist with the other one to hold it steady. At least there was no weekend security guy in the lobby to worry about. I suppose that particular paranoid virus will work its way down Park Avenue South eventually, but for the time being, building management still assumes that if you’ve got the right set of keys, you must be in the right place.

We got in through the door and then Herb stopped, holding my upper arm with one hand and Bill’s with the other. A

daffy, goony smile was surfacing on his face, where his complexion had begun to subside to a more normal pink.

“He’s dead, you guys. He wasn’t before, but he is now. Ding-dong, the General’s dead!” And to my total amazement, Herb Porter, the Barry Goldwater of 490 Park Avenue South, actually raised his hands, began snapping his fingers, and did a little Mexican hat-dance step.

“You’re sick, Herb,” Bill said.

“He’s also right,” I said. “The General’s dead and so’s—”

There came a clattery, disorganized knocking on the street door. It made us all jump and clutch each other. We must have looked like Dorothy and her friends on the Yellow Brick Road, faced with some new danger.

“Let go of me, both of you,” Bill said. “It’s just the boss.”

It was indeed Roger, hammering on the door and peering in at us, with the tip of his nose squished into a little white dime against the glass. Bill let him in. Roger joined us. He also looked as if someone had lit him on fire and then blown him out, but at least he was dressed, socks and all. Probably he was on his way out, anyway.

“Where’s Sandra?” was the first thing he asked.

“She was going to Cony Island,” Herb said. His color was coming back, and I realized he was blushing. It was sort of cute, in a ponderous way. “She might well turn up, though.” He paused. “If it carried that far. The telepathy thing, I mean.” He looked almost timid, an expression I never expected to see on Herb’s face. “What do you guys think?”

“I think it might have,” Roger said. “That was her gadget that went off in our heads, wasn’t it? The Dark and Stormy Night whatsit.”

I nodded. So did Bill and Herb.

Roger took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. “Come on, let’s see what kind of a mess we’re in.” He paused. “And whether or not we can get out of it.”

The elevator seemed to take forever. None of us said anything, not out loud, anyway, and when I discovered I could turn off the run of their thoughts, I did so. Hearing all those muttering voices twined together in the middle of your head is distressing. I suppose that now I know how schizophrenics must feel.

When the door opened on the fifth floor and the smell hit us, we all winced. Not in distaste, but in surprise. “Oh man,” Herb said. “All the way out here in the fucking hall. Do you suppose anyone else could smell it? I mean, anyone else but us?”

Roger shook his head and started toward the Zenith offices, walking with his hands rolled into fists. He stopped outside the office door. “Which of you has the key? Because I left mine at home.”

I was rummaging for them in my pocket when Bill stepped forward and tried the knob. It turned. He looked at us with his eyebrows raised, then went in.

I’d characterize what we’d smelled when the elevator door opened on Five as a scent. In the reception office it was much, much stronger—what you would have called a reek, if it had been unpleasant. It wasn’t, so what does that leave? Pungent, I suppose; a pungent, earthy smell.

This is so hard. To this point I've been racing along, wanting to get to what we found (and what we didn't), but here I find myself moving much more slowly, searching for ways to describe what is, essentially, indescribable. And it occurs to me how infrequently we are called upon to write about smells and the powerful ways in which they affect us. The smell in the Central Falls House of Flowers was similar to this in its strength, but in other ways, important ways, entirely different. The greenhouse smell was threatening, sinister. This one was like...

Well, I might as well just say it. It was like coming home.

Roger looked around at Bill and me and gave us a forbidding District Attorney stare. "Toast and jam?" he asked. "Popcorn? Honeysuckle? New goddam car?"

We shook our heads. Zenith had put its various disguises aside, perhaps because it no longer needs them to entice us. I tuned into their thoughts again, just enough to know that Bill and Roger smelled what I did. There were variations, I'm sure, as no two sets of perception are alike (not to mention no two sets of olfactory receptors), but basically it was the same thing. Green...strong...friendly...home. I just hope and pray I'm not wrong about the friendly part.

"Come on," Roger said.

Herb grabbed his arm. "What if somebody—"

"Nobody's here," I said. "Carlos was and the General was, but they're...you know...gone."

"Don't gild the lily," Bill said. "They're dead."

"Come on," Roger repeated, and we followed him.

The reception area was clean as a whistle, the garlic still holding Zenith at bay, but the first green scouts had already gotten to within five feet of the pass-through to the editorial department (there's no door at the reception end of the hallway, only a square arch flanked by Macho Man posters). Fifteen or twenty feet down, where the door to Roger's office opens on the left, the growth has thickened considerably, covering most of the carpet and climbing up the walls. By the point where Herb's office and Sandra's face each other, it has covered the old gray carpet in a new carpet of fresh green, as well as most of the walls. It has gotten a start on the ceiling for good measure, hanging from the fluorescent lights in ropy swags. Beyond that, down toward Riddley's country, it has become a jungle. Yet I knew that if I walked down there, it would open to let me pass.

Pass, friend, come home. Yes, I could hear it whi Roger said. "That was her gadget that went off in our heads, wasn't it? The Dark and Stormy Night whatsit."

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Roger shook his head and started toward the Zenith offices, walking with his hands rolled into fists. He stopped outside the office door. “Which of you has the key? Because I left mine at home.”

I was rummaging for them in my pocket when Bill stepped forward and tried the knob. It turned. He looked at us with his eyebrows raised, then went in.

I’d characterize what we’d smelled when the elevator door opened on Five as a scent. In the reception office it was much, much stronger—what you would have called a reek, if it had been unpleasant. It wasn’t, so what does that leave? Pungent, I suppose; a pungent, earthy smell.

This is so hard. To this point I’ve been racing along, wanting to get to what we found (and what we didn’t), but here I find myself moving much more slowly, searching for ways to describe what is, essentially, indescribable. And it occurs to me how infrequently we are called upon to write about smells and the powerful ways in which they affect us. The smell in the Central Falls House of Flowers was similar to this in its strength, but in other ways, important ways, entirely different. The greenhouse smell was threatening, sinister. This one was like...

Well, I might as well just say it. It was like coming home.

Roger looked around at Bill and me and gave us a forbidding District Attorney stare. “Toast and jam?” he asked. “Popcorn? Honeysuckle? New goddam car?”

We shook our heads. Zenith had put its various disguises aside, perhaps because it no longer needs them to entice us.

I tuned into their thoughts again, just enough to know that Bill and Roger smelled what I did. There were variations, I'm sure, as no two sets of perception are alike (not to mention no two sets of olfactory receptors), but basically it was the same thing. Green...strong...friendly...home. I just hope and pray I'm not wrong about the friendly part.

"Come on," Roger said.

Herb grabbed his arm. "What if somebody—"

"Nobody's here," I said. "Carlos was and the General was, but they're...you know...gone."

"Don't gild the lily," Bill said. "They're dead."

"Come on," Roger repeated, and we followed him.

The reception area was clean as a whistle, the garlic still holding Zenith at bay, but the first green scouts had already gotten to within five feet of the pass-through to the editorial department (there's no door at the reception end of the hallway, only a square arch flanked by Macho Man posters). Fifteen or twenty feet down, where the door to Roger's office opens on the left, the growth has thickened considerably, covering most of the carpet and climbing up the walls. By the point where Herb's office and Sandra's face each other, it has covered the old gray carpet in a new carpet of fresh green, as well as most of the walls. It has gotten a start on the ceiling for good measure, hanging from the fluorescent lights in ropy swags. Beyond that, down toward Riddley's country, it has become a jungle. Yet I knew that if I walked down there, it would open to let me pass.

Pass, friend, come home. Yes, I could hear it whispering that to me.

“Ho...lee...shit,” Bill said.

“We’ve created a monster,” Herb said, and even in that moment of stress and wonder it occurred to me that he’d been reading too many Anthony LaScorbia novels for his own good.

Roger started down the hallway, moving slowly. We had all heard pass, friend, and we all felt that undeniable welcome, but we were all ready to run, just the same. It was just too new, too weird.

Although there’s only one corridor in the office suite, it makes that little zigzag jog in the middle. We call the part running through the editorial offices “the front corridor.” Beyond the jog are the mailroom, the janitor’s cubby, and a utility room to which only the building’s personnel are supposed to have access (although I suspect Riddley has a key). This part is called “the back corridor.”

In the front corridor, there are three offices on the left: Roger’s, Bill’s, and Herb’s. On the right there’s a small office supply closet mostly taken up by our cranky Xerox machine, then my office, and finally Sandra’s. The doors to Roger’s office, Bill’s, and the supply closet were all closed. My door, Herb’s door, and Sandra’s door were all open.

“Fuu-uck,” Herb said in a horrified whisper. “Look on the side of her door.”

“It’s not Kool-Aid, I can tell you that much,” Bill said.

“More on the carpet, too,” Roger said. Herb used the f-word again, once more breaking it into two syllables.

There was no blood on the ivy-runners, I noticed, and although I didn’t want to think about that too much, I

suppose I know why not. Our buddy gets hungry, and doesn’t that make perfect sense? There’s so much more of it to support now, so many new outposts and colonies, and our psychic vibrations can probably offer it only so much in the way of nourishment. There’s an old blues tune on the subject. “Grits ain’t groceries,” the chorus goes. By the same token, friendly thoughts and supportive editors ain’t...

Well, they ain’t blood.

Are they?

Roger looked into Herb’s office and I looked into mine. My place looked okay, but I knew damned well Carlos had been there, and not just because of the fancy-shmancy attache case sitting on top of the desk. I could almost smell him.

“Things are a trifle disarranged in your cubby, Herbert,” Bill said in a really terrible English butler voice. Maybe it was his way of trying to lighten the tension. “In fact, I believe someone may have urinated a bit in theah.”

Herb glanced in, saw the destruction, and grunted an oath that sounded almost absent-minded before turning to Sandra’s office. By then, I was getting a pretty clear picture. Two crazy men, both with grudges against different Zenith House editors. I didn’t care how they got in or which of them had arrived first, but I was curious about how far apart in time they’d been. If they’d met in the lobby and had their lunatic shootout there, they could have saved us a lot of trouble. Only that probably wasn’t the way Zenith wanted it. Aside from the fact that Carlos may have owed a rather large debt to something (or Something) in the Great Beyond, there’s the fact that grits ain’t groceries. Telepathic plants get more than lonely, it seems. Pore little fellers get hungry, too.

It’s certainly something to think about.

“Roger?” Herb asked. He was still standing by his door, and he sounded timid again. “She...she’s not in there, is she?”

“No,” Roger said absently, “you know she’s not. Sandra’s on her way back from Cony Island. But our friend from Central Falls is finally present and accounted for.”

We gathered around the door and looked in.

Carlos Detweiller lay face-down in what Anthony LaScorbia would undoubtedly call “a gruesome pool of spreading blood.” The back of his suitcoat was pulled upward in a tent-shape, and the tip of a knife protruded through it. His hands were outstretched toward the desk. His feet, pointing toward the door, had already been partially covered by thin green bows of ivy. Zenith had actually pulled off one of his loafers and worked his way through the sock beneath. Maybe there was a hole in the sock to begin with, but somehow I don’t think so. Because there were broken strands of ivy, you see. As if it had tried to pull him out, out and down toward the main mass of the growth, and had been unable. You could almost feel the hunger. The longing to have his carcass the way it had undoubtedly already had the General’s.

“This is where they fought, of course,” Roger said, still in that absent tone of voice. He saw the Rainy Day Friend lying on the floor, picked it up, sniffed at the little hole on top, and winced. His eyes began to water at once.

“If you set off the siren in that thing again, I will be forced to kill you as dead as the asshole at your feet,” Bill said.

“I think the battery’s fried,” Roger said, but he set the thing down on Sandra’s desk very carefully, also being careful not to step on Detweiller’s outstretched hand.

Carlos had been in my office, because I was the one against whom he'd built his grudge. Then he left for something.

"I think it was food," Bill said. "He got hungry and went looking for food. The General jumped him. Carlos got to Sandra's gadget before Hecksler could give him the coup de grace, but it wasn't enough. Do you see that part, John?"

I shook my head. Maybe I just didn't want to see it.

"What's this?" Bill was out in the hall. He dropped to one knee, moved aside a clump of ivy, and showed us a guitar pick. Like the leaves of Zenith himself, the pick was as clean as a whistle. No blood, I mean.

"Something printed on it," Bill said, and squinted. "JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE, it says."

Roger looked at me, finally startled out of his daze. "Good God, John," he said, "that was him! He was her!"

"What are you talking about?" Bill asked, turning the pick over and over in his fingers. "What are you thinking about? Who's Crazy Guitar Gertie?"

"The General," I said hollowly, and wondered if he'd had the knife when I gave him the two dollars. If Herb had been there that day, he'd be dead now. There was absolutely no question about that in my mind. And I myself was lucky to be alive.

"Well, I wasn't there, and you are alive," Herb said. He spoke with his old don't-trouble-me-with-the-details irritability, but his face was still pale and shocked, the face of a man who is running entirely on instinct. "And congratulations, Gelb, you just left your dabs on that guitar pick. Better wipe em off."

I could see other stuff scattered amid the thickening greenery back down the hall: shredded bits of clothing, a few pieces of what looked like a pamphlet of some kind, paper money, coins.

“Fingerprints aren’t a problem because nobody’s ever going to see any of the old coot’s stuff,” Roger said. He took the pick from Bill, briefly examined the printing, then walked a little way down the corridor. The drifts and clumps of ivy drew back for him, just as I had known they would. Roger tossed the pick. A leaf folded over it and it was gone. Just like that.

Then, in my head, I heard Roger’s voice. Zenith! As if calling a dog. Eat this crap up! Make it gone!

And for the first time I heard it speak a coherent reply. There isn’t anything I can do about the coins. Or these damn things.

Halfway up the wall, just beyond Herb’s office door, a shiny green leaf almost the size of a dinner plate unrolled. Something bright dropped to the carpet with a clink. I walked down and picked up Iron-Guts’s Army ID tags on a silver beaded chain. Feeling very weird about it—you must believe me when I say words cannot begin to tell—I slipped them into my pants pocket. Meanwhile, Bill and Herb were picking up the General’s silver change. As this went on, there was a low rustling sound. The bits of clothing and shreds of paper were disappearing back into the jungle where the front corridor becomes the back one.

“And Detweiller?” Bill asked in a hushed voice. “Same deal?”

Roger’s eyes met mine for a moment, questioning. Then we shook our heads, both at the same time.

“Why not?” Herb asked.

“Too dangerous,” I said.

We waited for Zenith to speak again, to contradict the idea, perhaps, but there was nothing.

“Then what?” Herb asked plaintively. “What are we supposed to do with him? What are we supposed to do with his goddam briefcase? For that matter, what are we supposed to do with any little pieces of the General we come across in the back corridor? His belt-buckle, for instance?”

Before any of us could answer, a man’s voice called from the reception area. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

We looked at each other in utter surprise, in that first moment too shocked for panic.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81

When I got to the train station, I stuck my suitcase into the first unoccupied coin-op locker I came to, snatched the key with the big orange head out of the lock, and dropped it into my pocket, where it will undoubtedly stay at least until tomorrow. The worst is over—for now—but I can’t even think about getting my luggage, or doing any sort of ordinary chore. Not yet. I’m too exhausted. Physically, yes, but I’ll tell you what’s worse: I’m morally exhausted. I think that is a result of returning to Zenith House so soon upon the heels of my nightmare falling-out with my sisters and brother. Any high moral ground I might have claimed when the train pulled out of Birmingham is all gone now, I can assure you.

It’s hard to feel moral after you’ve crossed the George Washington Bridge with a body in the back of a borrowed panel truck. Very hard indeed. And I can’t get that goddamned whitebread John Denver song out of my head. “There’s a fire softly burning, supper’s on the stove, gee it’s good to be back home again.” That’s one wad I’m tard of chewin’, Uncle Michael might have said.

But 490 Park Avenue did feel like home. Does. In spite of all the horror and strangeness, it feels like home. Kenton knows. The others, too, but Kenton knows it best of all. I’ve grown to like them all (in my own admittedly involuted way), but Kenton is the one I respect. And if this situation starts to spin out of control, I believe it’s Kenton that I’d go to. Although I must say this before plunging back into narrative: I’m afraid of myself now. Afraid of my capacity to do ill, and to carry on doing ill until it’s too late to turn around and make amends.

In other words, the situation may already be out of control, and me with it.

Gee, it’s good to be back home again.

Well, let it go. I’m tired and I still have a lot to tell, so that’s best. I feel a moral tract itching to get out, but we’ll just save it for another day, shall we?

I told the cab driver to take me to 490, then changed my mind and had him drop me at Park and Twenty-ninth, instead. I wanted to scout a little bit, I suppose. Get the lay of the land and creep up on the blind side. It’s important to

make one thing clear: the range of the telepathy generated from the plant, while wider, is still limited to the vicinity of the building...unless the situation is extreme, as it was during the death-struggle between Hecksler and the Mad Florist.

I don’t know if I expected police, SWAT teams, or fire trucks, but all I saw was Sandra Jackson, pacing up and down in front of the building, looking half-distracted with worry and indecision. She didn’t see me. I don’t think she would have seen Robert Redford if he’d strolled by stark naked. As I walked toward her, she went to the building’s door, hands cupped to the sides of her face, then seemed to come to a decision. She spun on her heels and started toward the street, clearly meaning to cross to the uptown side.

“Sandra!” I called, breaking into a trot. “Sandra, hold on!”

She turned, first startled, then relieved. I saw she was wearing a big pink button on her coat which read I LUV CONY ISLAND! She started running toward me, and I realized it was the first time I had ever seen her in a pair of sneakers. She threw herself into my arms so hard she almost knocked me onto the sidewalk.

“Riddley, Riddley, thank God you came back early,” she babbled. “I took a cab all the way from Cony Island...cost a fortune...my niece thinks I’m either crazy or in love...I...what are you doing here?”

“Just think of me as the cavalry in a John Wayne movie,” I said, and set her back on her feet. That much was easy. Getting her to let go, I thought, might not be. She clung like a barnacle.

“Tell me you’ve got your office keys,” she said, and I could smell something sweet on her breath—cotton candy, maybe.

“I’ve got them,” I said, “but I can’t get them unless you let go of me, honey child.” I called her that with no irony whatsoever. It’s what Mama always called us when we came in with scraped knees, or upset from being teased.

She let go and looked up at me solemnly, as big-eyed as a waif in one of those velvet paintings. “Something’s different about you, Riddley. What is it?”

I shrugged and shook my head. “Don’t know. Maybe we can discuss it at another time.”

“John’s enemy is dead. So is Herb’s. I think they killed each other.”

That wasn’t what she thought, not exactly, but I took her by the arm and lead her back toward the door. The only thing I wanted right then was to get her off the street. People were looking at us strangely, and not because she’s white and I’m black. And people who see a crying woman on a sunny Saturday afternoon are apt to remember her, even in a city where instant amnesia is the rule rather than the exception.

“The rest of them are up there,” she said, “but I forgot my damned keys. I’d just decided to go across to Smiler’s and try calling them when you showed up. Thank God you did.”

“Thank God I did,” I agreed, and used my keys to let us into the lobby.

We smelled it as soon as we got off on Five, and in the Zenith House reception area, it was strong enough to knock you down. A spicy aroma. And green. Sandra was clutching my hand hard enough to hurt.

“Hello?” I called. “Is anyone here?”

Nothing for a moment. Then I heard Wade say, “It’s Riddley.” To which Porter replied, “Don’t be an ass.” To which Gelb replied, “Yes. It is.”

“Are you guys all right?” Sandra asked. She still had me by my hand and was dragging me toward the hall. At first I didn’t want to go...and then I did.

We got around LaShonda’s desk and there they were. At first I hardly noticed them, though. The only thing I had eyes for was the plant. No more tired, bedraggled little ivy in a pot. The Brazilian rainforest has been transplanted to Park Avenue South. It was everywhere.

“Riddley,” Kenton said with obvious relief. “Sandra.”

“What are you doing here, Riddley?” Gelb asked. “I thought you weren’t coming back until the middle of next week.”

“My plans changed,” I said. “I got in on the train less than an hour ago.”

“What happened to your accent?” Porter asked. He was standing there with that crazy plant growing all around his feet, caressing his ankles, for God’s sake, and looking at me with beetle-browed suspicion. At me with suspicion!

“That’s it,” Sandra breathed. “That’s what’s different.”

I freed my hand from her grip, feeling that I might need my fingers in reasonable working order before the day was done. The picture (a picture, anyway) was coming clear in my head: a kind of silent movie, in fact. I was getting some of it from them and some of it from Zenith.

The suspicion had left Herb Porter’s face. It was only my lack of accent which had bothered him, not me. What I felt as we

stood there amid that green madness was a sense of family, a sense of all I had missed down in Alabama, and I embraced it. Away from the plant it is still possible to question, to mistrust. Within its range of influence? Never. These were my brothers, Sandra my sister (although the relationship between she and I is admittedly an incestuous one). And the plant? Our father, which art in Zenith. Color—white, black, green—was just then the least important thing about us. This afternoon it was us against the world.

“I wouldn’t go in your office just this minute, Sandra,” Roger said. “Mr. Detweiller is currently in residence. And he ain’t pretty.”

“The General?” she asked.

“The plant took him,” John replied, and at that moment Zenith spat back the remaining bits of Hecksler it had decided it couldn’t digest, perhaps conveying them all the way from the back of the office. The stuff hit the carpet in a rainy, metallic tinkle. There was a pocket watch, the chain it had been on (in three pieces), a belt buckle, a very small plastic box, and several tiny pieces of metal. Herb and Bill picked all this stuff up.

“Good Lord,” Bill said, looking at the box. “It’s his pacemaker.”

“And these are surgical pins,” Herb said. “The kind orthopedic surgeons use to hold bones together.”

“All right,” Wade said. “Let’s assume that the plant is taking care of the General’s corpse. I think it’s clear we can dispose of his remaining...accessories...with no trouble, should we choose to. Detweiller’s attache case, too.”

“What do you think is in it?” Sandra asked.

“I don’t want to know. The question is what to do with his body. I’m on record as saying we shouldn’t feed it to the plant. I think it’s had all the...all the nourishment it needs.”

“All that’s safe for it to have,” John said.

“Maybe more,” Bill added.

I should step in here just long enough to say that, although I am presenting all of this as spoken conversation, a good part of it was mind to mind. I can’t remember which was which, and wouldn’t know how to express the difference, anyway. I’m not sure it even matters. What I remember most clearly was a sense of absurd happiness. After nine months of pushing a broom or the mail-cart, I was attending my first editorial meeting. Because isn’t that what we were doing? Editing the situation, or preparing to?

“We could call the cops,” Roger said, and when Bill and John both started to protest, he raised his hand to stop them. “I’m just articulating the idea. They wouldn’t see the plant, we know that.”

“But they might feel it,” Sandra said, clearly dismayed. “And Roger—”

“Zenith might decide to lunch on one of them,” I finished for her.

“ Filet de flic, the special of the day. He might not be able to help himself. Or itself. Zenith may or may not be our true friend, but it’s essentially a man-eater. It would behoove us to remember that.”

I have to admit I found the way Herb Porter was looking at me rather delicious. It was as if, while visiting the zoo, he'd heard one of the monkeys begin to recite Shakespeare.

"Let's cut to the chase," John said. "Roger, may I?"

Roger nodded assent.

"We've gotten this raggedy-ass publishing company to the edge of

something," John said, "and I'm not talking about mere financial solvency. I'm talking about financial success. With Last Survivor, the joke book, and the General book, we're not just going to make a noise in the publishing industry; we're going to create a goddam sonic boom that'll startle the shit out of everyone. A lot of people are going to turn around and take notice. And for me, that's not even the best of it. The best is that we're going to stick it to those assholes at Apex."

"Tell it!" Bill cried savagely, and that gave me a shiver. It was what Sophie had said to my sister Maddy, when Maddy accused me of playing nigger up in New York. Like hearing a ghost, in other words. Because that's what my family is to me now, all of them. Ghosts.

"It took magic to make the turnaround possible," John continued, "and I admit that. But all of publishing is a kind

of magic, isn’t it? And not just publishing. Any company that successfully brokers the creative arts to the public is magic. It’s spinning straw into gold. Look at us, for Christ’s sake! Accountants by day, dreamers by night—”

“And bullshitters in the afternoon,” Herb put in. “Don’t forget that.” “Maybe you could get back to the point, John,” Roger agreed. “The point is no cops,” John said harshly. And, I felt, with admirable

brevity. “No outsiders. That ivy is helping us clean up our mess, and we’re going to clean up its mess.”

“Dead people, though,” Sandra said. She looked quite pale, and

when she reached out for my hand again, I let her take it. I was glad for the touch myself. “We’re talking about dead people.”

“We’re talking about a couple of dead loonies who killed each other,” Herb said. “Besides, only one corpse.”

There was a moment of silence as we dealt with that. I think it was the crucial moment. Because, down deep, we all knew that, while the General might have killed Carlos, Zenith had taken care of Hecksler.

“Nothing bad happened here,” Bill said, as if to himself.

“You got that right,” Herb said. “Anyone want to defend the position that the world is worse off because those two jagoffs are no longer in it?”

A moment’s silence, and then John Kenton said: “If we’re not going to feed Detweiller to the plant, how are we going to get rid of him?”

Bill Gelb said: “I have an idea.”

“If that’s true,” Roger said, “then this might be a good time to spill it.”

From Bill Gelb’s Diary

4/5/81

There were some doubts at first, but I’ll tell you one thing: mind-reading cuts through a lot of bullshit, the emotional as well as the plain old everyday problems people have trying to communicate by word of mouth. I’m pretty sure that what got through to them was my confidence, my sense that I had the right idea and that we could carry it off. It was the way I felt in the park, shooting dice with the rest of the yuppie scum. I only wish I’d gotten to the poker game. Oh well, there’ll be another time.

Besides, I did get to Paramus.

From the journals of Riddley Walker

4/5/81 (continued)

The truck was an old rattletrap, the windshield milky around the edges; the heater didn’t work and the springs were shot; the seats were lumpy and the stink of cooking exhaust came up through the floorboards, presumably from a defective exhaust-pipe or manifold. But the toll-taker on the GW never even looked at us twice, so I considered it a beautiful thing. Also, the radio worked. When I turned it on, the first thing I got was John Denver: “Gee it’s great to be back home again! Sometimes this old farm seems like a long-lost friend…”

“Please,” Bill said. “Do you have to?”

“I like it,” I said, and began tapping my feet. Between us was a medium-sized paper bag with the Smiler’s logo on it. Inside it were those few of the General’s effects which Zenith found indigestible. The Mad Florist’s briefcase was under the seat, giving off some very nasty vibrations. And no, I do not believe that was just my imagination.

“You like this? Riddley, I don’t make reference to your color lightly, but don’t Afro-American gentlemen such as yourself usually enjoy folks like Marvin Gaye? The Temptations? The Stylistics? James Brown? Arthur Conley? Otis Redding?”

I thought of telling him that Otis Redding was as dead as the fellow in the back of the rattly old panel truck in which we were currently crossing the Hudson River, then decided to keep my mouth shut on that score.

“I happen to enjoy this particular tune.” In fact, I did. “Look outside, Bill. The moon’s coming up on one side and the sun’s going down on the other. It’s what my Mama used to call double delight.”

“I was very sorry to hear about your Mama, Riddley,” he said, and I blessed him for that. Inside my head, however, where he could no longer hear the blessing. Not once we got away from the building where Zenith the common ivy now holds court.

“Thank you, Bill.”

“Did she…you know, did she suffer?”

“No. I don’t believe she did.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Yes,” I said.

The John Denver song ended and was replaced by something infinitely worse: Sammy Davis Jr. singing about the candyman. Who can take a rainbow, dip it in a dream? Shuddering, I turned the radio off again. But the John Denver song lingered in my head: Gee it’s good to be back home again.

We alit on the Jersey side, me in the passenger seat and Bill behind the wheel of the old truck with the fading Holsum Bread stickers on the sides. He had borrowed it from a friend, who hopefully has no idea of what we were transporting, rolled up in an old rug-remnant which Herb Porter found in the supply closet.

When, some hours before, Bill finished outlining his plan, Roger asked: “Who’s going to go with you, Bill? You can’t do it alone.”

“I will,” I said.

“You?” John asked. “But you’re—” He stopped there, but we were still on the fifth floor, still in Zenith’s presence, and we all heard the continuation of his thought: —only the janitor!

“Not any more, he’s not,” Roger said. “I’m hereby hiring you in an executive capacity, Riddley. If you want it, that is.”

I gave him my Number One Nigger Jim smile, the one which features roughly two thousand huge white teeth. “I’se gwine to be an edituh in dis heah fine cump’ny? Why, sho! Sho! Dat’d be purty good!”

“But not if you talk like that,” John said.

“I’se gwine try to do bettah! Try to improve mah dictive qualities, as well!”

“This smells like bribery to me,” Sandra said. She squeezed my hand and looked at Roger with mistrusting eyes.

“You know better,” Roger said, and of course she did. That sense of family was too strong to deny. God only knows what’s ahead of us, but we’re in it together. Of that there can no longer be any doubt.

“What are you going to pay him with?” Herb wanted to know. “Smiler’s Extra Value coupons? Enders will never approve another editor’s salary. And if he finds out you’re promoting the janitor, he’ll shit.”

“For payroll purposes, Riddley will continue in his janitorial capacity for the time being,” Roger said. He sounded perfectly serene, perfectly sure of himself. “Later, we’re going to have all the money we need to pay him a full salary. Riddley, how does $35,000 a year sound to you? Retroactive to today, April 4, 1981?”

“Goodness-graciousme! I be de flashies’ nigga in de Cotton Club!”

“It sounds fine to me, too,” John said, “since it’s five a year more than I am currently making.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Roger said. “You, Herb, Bill, and Sandra are being raised to…let’s see…fortyfive a year.”

“Fortyfive thousand?” Herb whispered. His eyes had a suspicious gleam to them, as if he were about to break down and cry. “Fortyfive thousand dollars?”

“Retroactive to April 4th, same as Rid.” He turned to me. “And seriously, Rid—ditch the Rastus.”

“It’s gone for good as of now,” I said.

He nodded. “As for me,” he said, “what does the Bible say? ‘The laborer is worthy of his hire.’ I’m now making forty. How much should I get for steering the good ship Zenith away from the rocks of the lee shore and into the open sea, where the trade winds blow?”

“How about sixty?” Bill asked.

“Make it sixtyfive,” Sandra proposed giddily. After all, it was Sherwyn Redbone’s money Roger was spending.

“No,” Roger said, “no need to be vulgar, not the first year, anyway. I think fifty thousand will be fine.”

“Not bad for any of us, considering the plant’s doing it all,” Bill said.

“That’s not true,” John said, a little sharply. “We’ve always had the skills to do this job, all of us. The plant is just giving us the opportunity.”

“Besides,” Herb said, “it’s getting room and board. What more does it require? An ivy doesn’t exactly need a new car, does it?” He looked at Bill. “Are you sure you don’t want me to join the disposal crew? I will, if you want me.”

Bill Gelb thought it over, then shook his head. “Two of us should do just fine. But we ought to put the…you know, the remains…in something. I wonder what there is?”

Which was when Herb went into the supply closet, rummaged awhile, then came back out dragging the rug remnant behind him.

It turned out to be just the right size. Bill and I were exempted from the task of gift-wrapping Carlos Detweiller, and I thought Sandra would stay with us out in the hall

(exempting herself, as it were, by virtue of her sex), but she pitched in with a will. And all around us Zenith hummed contentedly, putting a floor under us, sending out what the Beach Boys (another whitebread favorite of mine) would probably call “good vibrations.”

“Telepathy seems to improve teamwork,” Bill commented, and I had to admit it was true. Sandra and Herb spread out the rug beside Sandra’s desk. Roger and John lifted Detweiller and deposited him face-down at one end of the rug. Then, working together, they simply rolled him up like a Devil Dog pastry, securing the whole with the heaviest twine the supply closet could provide.

“Man, he bled a lot,” Bill said. “That rug’s a mess.”

“The plant will suck up most of it today and Sunday,” I said.

“You really think so?”

I really did. I also thought that I could get up most of the residue with a good application of Genie Rug Cleaner. The final result might not fool a police forensics specialist, but if the police wind up in here, our butts are probably going to be baked, anyway. To an ordinary outsider, the remaining stain on Sandra’s carpet will look as if someone spilled a pot of coffee there a few months ago. Maybe the only real question is whether or not Sandra can live with that manta-ray shadow in the place where she earns her daily bread. If she can’t, I suppose I can replace that particular piece of carpet. Because it’s as Roger says: such minimal expenses will soon no longer annoy us.

“You’re sure you can get this truck?” Roger called out from Sandra’s office. He was sitting back on his heels and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. “What if the guy’s gone for the weekend?”

“He’s home,” Bill said, “or at least he was an hour and a half ago. I saw him on my way out. And for fifty dollars, he’d rent me his grandmother. He’s a nice enough guy, but he’s got this little problem.” He mimed sniffing, first closing one nostril and then the other.

“Make sure he’s there,” Roger said, then turned to John. “Body disposal bonuses at Christmas for all of us. Make a note.”

“Sure, just don’t put it in your monthly report,” John said, and we all laughed. I suppose that must sound gruesome, but it was the cheeriest, most collegial laughter you ever heard. I believe that Sandra, with a tiny smear of Carlos Detweiller’s blood on her forearm and another on her right palm, laughed hardest of all.

Bill went in his office and got on the phone. Roger and John moved Carlos, now wrapped in the brown rug remnant, down to the reception area, behind LaShonda’s desk.

“I can see his shoes,” Sandra said. “They’re sticking out a little.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be okay,” Herb said, and just like that I knew that he’s been doing the horizontal bop with the lady fair. Well, mo powah to him, is all dis fella kin say. Might be no mo playin truck-drivah and l’il girl hitchhikah, praise de Lawd.

“Nothing’s going to be okay until that homicidal idiot’s taken care of,” Sandra said. She started to brush her hair back, saw the blood on her hand, and grimaced.

Bill came out of his office, smiling. “One old but serviceable panel truck, at our service,” he said. “Bread company advertising logos on the sides, very faded. Riddley, we take

it away this afternoon at four—in less than three hours, in other words—and I bring it back later tonight. No questions asked, although I had to agree to mileage, as well. Two bits per. That okay, boss?”

Roger nodded. “This guy lives downstairs from you, right?”

“Right. He’s a stockbroker. Buying vehicles at auction and turning them over is just a sideline. I think he scams the insurance companies when he can, as well. I could have gotten a hearse, actually, but that seemed…I don’t know… ostentatious.”

To me, the idea of taking Detweiller to a Jersey landfill in a hurry-up wagon seemed not ostentatious but downright creepy. I kept my mouth shut on the subject, however.

“And this place in Paramus?” John asked. “It’s safe? Relatively safe?”

“According to some of the talk I’ve heard at Ginelli’s game, it’s as safe as the grave.” Bill saw our faces and grimaced. “To coin a phrase.”

“All right,” Roger said heavily. “Sandra’s office looks more or less okay. Let’s clean up Herb’s and John’s and then get the hell out of here.”

We did it, then adjourned to the cafeteria a block over to get something to eat. None of us had much in the way of appetite, and Bill left early to conclude negotiations with the fellow downstairs.

Outside the cafeteria, on the curb, John took my arm. He looked tired but composed. In better shape than before I left for home, actually. “Riddley, are you okay with this?”

“Fine with it,” I said.

“Want me to ride along?”

I thought it over, then shook my head. “Three’s a crowd. I’ll call you when it’s taken care of. But it may be late.”

He nodded, started away, then turned back and grinned. There was something heartbreakingly sweet about it. “Welcome to the Green Thumb Editorial Society,” he said.

I sketched him a little salute. “Good to be here.”

As it was. And when I got to Bill’s place shortly thereafter, the old panel truck was already parked at the curb. Bill was standing next to it, smoking a cigarette and looking entirely at peace.

“Let’s pick up some cargo and take it to Jersey,” he said.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m your man,” I said.

We arrived back at 490 around quarter to five. At that hour on a Saturday afternoon, the building was as quiet as it ever gets. Absolutely dead, to coin another phrase. John’s nemesis lay where we had left him, neatly tied into his bundle of rug.

“Look at the plant, Riddley,” Bill said, but I already had. Runners had worked their way to the end of the corridor. There they clustered, barely held back by the garlic John and Roger had rubbed on the sides of the door. The tips were raised, and I could see them quivering. I thought of hungry diners looking in a restaurant window, and shivered a little. If not for the garlic, those advance feelers would already have worked their way into the carpet and around the corpse’s feet. Zenith is on our side, I feel quite sure of that,

but neither a stiff dick nor a hungry belly has much in the way of conscience, I’m afraid.

“Let’s get him out of here,” I said.

Bill agreed. “And make a note to refresh the garlic on that door. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“I don’t think garlic will hold it forever,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

Because we were back under Zenith’s telepathic umbrella, I thought my response at him rather than saying it out loud: It’s got to grow. If it can’t grow, it’ll die. But before it dies, it might—

Get mean? Bill finished for me.

I nodded. Yes, it might get mean. I’m sure that Detweiller and General Hecksler would say it had gotten fairly mean already.

We carried the rolled-up length of rug down the hall to the elevator, which opened at the touch of a button. There was no one else in the building to divert it to another location, of that I was positive. We would have heard their thoughts.

“We’re not going to have any problems at all, are we?” I asked Bill as we rode down. Mr. Detweiller lay between us, a troublesome fellow soon to take up permanent residence in New Jersey. “No little unexpected Hitchcock touches.”

Bill smiled. “I don’t think so, Riddley. We’re going to roll all sevens. Because the force is with us.”

And so it has been.

By the time the truck’s headlights picked out the sign on the edge of Route 27—PETERBOROUGH DISPOSAL CO. LANDFILL ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING—it was full dark and the moon was riding high in the sky. High and dreamy. It crossed my mind that the same moon was looking down on my Mama’s fresh grave in Blackwater.

There was a chain across the dirt road leading to the land fill, but it appeared to be looped over the posts to either side, not locked. I got out, slipped one of the loops free, and then motioned Bill to drive through. Once he was on the other side, I refixed the chain and got back in.

“The mob uses this place, I take it?” I asked.

“That’s the rumor.” Bill lowered his voice a little. “I heard one of Richie Ginelli’s pals say that Jimmy Hoffa is taking an extended vacation out this way.”

“Bill,” I said, “far be it for Zenith House’s most junior editor to tell you what to do—”

“Lay on, MacDuff,” he said, smiling.

“—but a poker game where one hears such odd bits of trivia might

not be the place for an ino ffensive editor of paperback originals.” “Speak for yourself,” he said, and although he

was still smiling, I

don’t believe that what came next was a joke. “If the bad boys cross me,

I’ll just sic my plant on them.”

“That’s what Carlos Detweiller thought, and he’s making his final pilgrimage in the back of a bread truck,” I said.

He looked at me, the smile fading a little. “You might have a point

there, partner.”

I did have a point there, but I doubt it will stop Bill from his weekend

poker forays. Just as I doubt that successfully having it off with Sandra

Jackson will stop Herb Porter from the occasional clandestine seat-sniffing expedition. We say “so-and-so should have known better” when soand-so comes to grief, but there is a world of difference between knowing

better and doing better. To misquote the Bible, we return to our vices like

a dog to its vomit, and when one thinks in such terms, I wonder at our

apparent determination to co-exist with Zenith the common ivy. To think

that he—or it—can make either our situation or ourselves any better. After considering what I’ve just written, I must laugh. I’m like a

junkie between fixes, temporarily sober and pontificating on the evils of

dope. Once I’m back in range of those humming good vibrations, everything will change. I know it as well as I know my own name. Knowing better…and doing better. Between them is the chasm. The dirt road ran through scruffy pine woods for a quarter of a mile

and then brought us out into a vast dirt circle filled with trash, discarded

appliances, and a stacked wall of junked cars. By the light of a full moon,

it looked like the death of all civilization. On the far side was a dropoff, its

steep sides covered with more trash. At the bottom, the bulldozers and

backhoes looked the size of a child’s toys.

“They bulldoze the crap down there, then cover it,” Bill said. “We’ll

take him twenty or thirty feet down the slope, then bury him. I’ve got shovels. I’ve also got gloves. I’m told there are rats in there as big as terriers.” But all that proved to be unnecessary; as Bill had said, the force was

with us and we were rolling all sevens. As he drove slowly toward the

dropoff and the actual landfill, weaving between those rusty cenotaphs of

junk, I saw a cluster of blue objects off to the left. They looked like mansized plastic capsules standing on end.

“Go over there,” I said, pointing.

“Why?”

“Just a feeling. Please, Bill.”

He shrugged and headed the panel truck that way. As we got closer,

a big grin began to dawn on his face. They were the Port-a-Pottys you see

at construction sites and in some roadside rest areas, but all these had had

the hell beaten out of them: dented roofs, broken doors, gaping holes in

some of the sides. They were standing about forty feet from the maw of a

silent machine that could only be a crusher.

“Think we hit the jackpot, Rid?” Bill asked, grinning. “I think we hit

the jackpot. In fact, I think you’re a fucking genius.”

There was a length of yellow tape strung around the cluster of blue

capsules, with KEEP OUT KEEP OUT KEEP OUT repeating endlessly in big black letters. Stuck to it with a lick of electrical tape was a note

written on a piece of cardboard in big hasty letters. I got out and read it

by the glow of the panel truck’s weak headlights:

TURK! These are the ones I told you about, City of Para. Please get that damn Mintz off my back and CRUSH THESE SOME-BITCHES MONDAY 1st thing! Thanks Buddy, “I owe you 1.”

FELIX

Bill had joined me and was also reading the note. “What do you think?” he asked.

“I think Carlos Detweiller is going to rejoin the universe as part of a City of Paramus Port-a-Potty reject,” I said. “Early Monday morning. Come on, let’s get it done. This place gives me a severe case of the creeps.”

A gust of wind blew through, rattling trash and sending cans rolling with a sound like rusty laughter. Bill looked around nervously. “Yeah,” he said. “Me too. Hang on while I kill the truck headlights.”

He popped the lights o ff and then we went around to the back of the truck and pulled out the rolled-up rug with our compadre Carlos inside. The moon had dived behind a cloud and as we ducked under the yellow KEEP OUT tape it re-

emerged, once more flooding the wasteland. I felt like a pirate in a Robert Louis Stevenson novel. But instead of “Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum,” the tune knocking around in my head was that damned John Denver thing about how good it was to be back home again. In this moonlit memorial to the gods of conspicuous consumption, I heard new words, my own words: There’s a crusher softly rumblin, rats are in the trash; gee it’s good to be back home again.

“Hang on, hang on,” Bill said, reaching behind him with one hand and propping the rug up with a raised knee. He looked like some bizarre species of stork.

At last he got the door of a Port-a-Potty open. We muscled our burden inside and propped it up between the gray plastic urinal and the toilet seat. The place still held the vague smell of urine and the ghost of old farts. In one high corner was a cobweb with the corpse of an ancient fly dangling from it. On the wall, by moonlight, I read two scrawlings.“For XCELLENT BLOJOB BE HERE 10 PM SHOW HARD I SWALLOW,” read one. The other, infinitely more disturbing, said: “I WILL DO IT AGAIN & AGAIN & AGAIN. UNTIL I AM CAUGHT.”

Suddenly I wanted to be miles from that place.

“Come on,” I said to Bill. “Please, man. Come on.”

“Just one more second.”

He went back to the truck and got the bag with the General’s final effects in it—buckle, pacemaker, osteopathic pins. He raised the lid on the toilet, then shook his head.

“Collection bin’s gone. It’ll just fall on the ground.”

“You don’t have the damn briefcase, either,” I said.

“We can’t leave that here,” Bill said. “Something in it might identify

him.”

“Hell, his fingerprints will identify him, if anyone finds him in there.” “Maybe. But we don’t know what’s in the case, do we? Best we drop

it in the Hudson on our way back. Safer.”

That made sense. “Give me the bag,” I said, but before he could I snatched the Smiler’s bag from him. I jogged to the edge of the drop-off and threw it as far out as I could. I watched it turn over and over in the moonlight. I even imagined I could hear the pins which had held the old warrior’s bones together rattling. Then it was gone.

I jogged back to Bill, who had re-latched the Port-a-Potty door. For a wonder, it was one of the less battered ones. It would keep the secret we needed it to keep.

“It’s all going to work, isn’t it?” Bill asked.

I nodded. Had no doubts then and no doubts now. We are being protected. All we need to do us to take reasonable precautions ourselves. And take care of our new friend, as well.

The moon sank back into the clouds. Bill’s eyes glittered in the sudden gloom like the eyes of an animal. Which is, of course, what we were. Two junkyard dogs, one with a white hide and one with a brown hide, skulking in the trash. A couple of junkyard dogs who had successfully buried their bones.

I had a moment of clarity then. A moment of sanity. I’m a Cornell graduate, aspiring novelist, fledgling editor (I can do the job to which Roger Wade has promoted me, of that I have no doubt). Bill Gelb is a graduate of William and Mary, a Red Cross blood-donor, a reader to the blind once a week at The Lighthouse. Yet we had just deposited the body of a murdered man in an acknowledged mafia graveyard. The General stabbed him, but are we not all accessories, in some measure?

Perhaps only John Kenton escapes blame on that score. He did tell me to throw the ivy away, after all. I even have the memo somewhere.

“We’re mad,” I whispered to Bill.

His whisper back was soft and deadly. “I don’t give a shit.”

We looked at each other for a moment, not speaking. Then the moon came out again, and we both dropped our eyes.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

And so we did. Back to Route 27, then back to the turnpike, then back to the George Washington Bridge. No one was behind us at that hour, and Carlos Detweiller’s case with the combination lock on it sailed away into the drink. No problems; smooth sailing. Saturday night and we didn’t even see a cop. And all the way, that song went running through my head: Gee it’s good to be back home again.

From John Kenton’s diary

April 5, 1981 1:30 A.M.

Riddley just called. Mission accomplished. The General is gone, and now the Mad Florist and his attache case are gone, as well.

Or maybe he’s not.

I just leafed back through these pages to the conversation Roger and I had with Tina Barfield, and what I read there, while not completely accurate, is hardly encouraging. She said we’d be reading Carlos’s obituary; what she neglected to tell me (probably because she didn’t know) was that I’d be writing it myself. She also told us to go on behaving as if Carlos were alive even after we knew he was dead. Because, she said, he’ll be back.

As a tulpa.

Even now I don’t know exactly what that is, but I tell you this with absolute certainty, utter conviction, and complete clarity of mind: the six of us haven’t gone through all of this to be stopped by anyone living, let alone